

Canada's security forces refuse to release their files on long dead CCF-NDP leader

Vic Neufeld
10 April 2010

A recent Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) decision to block the full release of police files dealing with a long dead leader of the social-democratic New Democratic Party and its predecessor, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), has underscored CSIS's function as a political and thought police directed, first and foremost, against the working class and left.

In November 2005, Jim Bronskill, a Canadian Press reporter specializing in security, intelligence and other justice-related issues, filed an access-to-information request for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's (RCMP) file on T.C. Douglas. The request was prompted by the approaching twentieth anniversary of Tommy Douglas's death, as personal files compiled by the RCMP's Security and Intelligence Branch can be released through Canada's access-to-information law twenty years after a subject's death. Douglas, Saskatchewan's CCF premier from 1944-61 and the NDP's first federal leader, died of cancer at age 81 in February 1986.

Bronskill's interest in the RCMP's surveillance of Douglas was also likely prompted by the renewed interest in him occasioned by a fall 2004 CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) audience-participation television program that selected him "the greatest Canadian."

In response to Bronskill's request, Library and Archives Canada, to which Douglas' RCMP file had been transferred by CSIS, released a 1,142-page dossier. But, under CSIS's supervision, it had blacked out approximately 30 percent of the dossier's content "due to national security concerns."

Bronskill then complained to the Office of the Information Commissioner, but the Commissioner upheld the state's decision to prevent access to much of the Douglas dossier. In addition, hundreds of other pages,

though decades old, also apparently remain completely sealed.

In October 2009 Bronskill and the Canadian Press filed a motion with the Federal Court of Canada challenging the Information Commissioner's decision and seeking the release of the full RCMP dossier on Douglas.

Paul Champ, an Ottawa human rights lawyer who has represented Guantanamo Bay detainee Omar Khadr and Canadians tortured abroad with the complicity of the Canadian state, is donating his time to the Douglas case, because he believes that the public has a right to see the "full historical" record, including the extent of the RCMP's surveillance of the long time social-democrat.

Scott White, the editor-in-chief of the Canadian Press, argues Canadians have a right to know what's in Douglas' file. "This is Canada's history that we're talking about. After all these years, with all the principals long gone, there's no logical reason to keep this information from the public."

CSIS—which at its creation in 1984 assumed many of the RCMP's political police functions—disagrees. In a January 21, 2010 affidavit, CSIS's access-to-information co-ordinator, Nicole Jalbert, stated, "I believe that the records for which access was denied contain information which could reasonably be expected to be injurious to the conduct of international affairs, the defence of Canada or any state allied or associated with Canada or the detection, prevention or suppression of subversive or hostile activities."

Jalbert was particularly concerned to suppress any information that might shed light on RCMP intelligence-gathering and help identify those who acted as police informers decades ago, for fear that it would disrupt the ongoing use of informers by Canada's security services.

"These people," declared Jalbert, "still have families and reputations. How are you going to recruit somebody if you can't guarantee their anonymity?"

Although some of the suppressed material dates from the 1930s and Douglas himself has been dead for almost a quarter century, Jalbert insisted that his dossier “is quite contemporary.”

She further argued that the information in Douglas’ file could be used to probe CSIS-RCMP procedures and administrative methodologies, including how the agency manages investigations. “The origin of information,” she asserted, “its extent and the methods by which it was obtained must remain a secret.”

A Baptist minister and Christian socialist, Douglas was never anything more than a moderate social-democrat.

In the late 1920s he advocated eugenics as a means of curbing poverty. His university’s master’s thesis, entitled “The Problems of the Subnormal Family,” advocated sterilizing the poor.

Under the impact of the Great Depression, which triggered an especially sharp fall in living standards in Saskatchewan, Douglas became active in the CCF, an organization whose politics married North American agrarian populism, Fabian socialism, and laborism.

With Douglas at its helm, the CCF was swept to power in 1944 in Saskatchewan, becoming North America’s first “socialist” government. In reality, Douglas’ CCF government pursued cautious reforms, creating a number of government-owned or Crown Corporations to promote economic development and introducing social-welfare legislation, much of which would not have been out of place in Bismarck’s Germany.

During the 1950s, Douglas’ government created Canada’s first free hospital-care program and the year after he moved on to become leader of the newly launched NDP, Saskatchewan’s CCF-NDP government fulfilled a longstanding pledge to create a universal public health care insurance program. This program subsequently became the model for Canada’s public health insurance scheme, Medicare.

Less well-remembered is the Saskatchewan government’s role in transforming the province into the world’s largest uranium exporter. Much of the province’s output went to support US nuclear weapons production.

Douglas was selected as the first leader of the NDP in part because he enjoyed the confidence of the Canadian Labour Congress officialdom. A large section of the union bureaucracy had long refused to support the CCF so that they could have their hands free to maneuver with the Liberals. But in creating the NDP, the social-democrats watered down their reformist program still further, as evidenced in the party’s choice of name, which evokes

the US Democratic Party. Even more decisive in winning the union bureaucracy’s support was the CCF leadership’s role in helping purge Communists and other militant workers from the unions in the early stages of the Cold War.

Under Douglas’ leadership the NDP helped prop up Lester Pearson’s federal Liberal government during the middle 1960s. To his credit, Douglas and the NDP opposed the Trudeau Liberal government’s suspension of basic civil liberties in Quebec in the fall of 1970 under the draconian War Measures Act.

Douglas’ political physiognomy is aptly summarized in a brief excerpt from Leon Trotsky’s writings on the problems of the British working class. “Throughout the whole history of the British Labour movement there has been pressure by the bourgeoisie upon the proletariat through the agency of radicals, intellectuals, drawing-room and church socialists and Owenites who reject the class struggle and advocate the principle of social solidarity, preach collaboration with the bourgeoisie, bridle, enfeeble and politically debase the proletariat.”

Yet Douglas was subjected to surveillance by Canada’s security forces throughout his political career, even as he served as a provincial premier, federal party leader and MP. Indeed, shortly before Douglas’ retirement in the late 1970s the RCMP recommended that the file on this rightwing social democrat remain open because “there is much we do not know about Douglas.”

The state surveillance of Douglas speaks volumes about the character of Canadian democracy. If the forces of the state went to such lengths to spy on a politician whose career was dedicated to policing the working class, to preaching the possibility of humanizing capitalism through parliamentary reforms and collective bargaining, and today, decades later, are so determined that the veil not be lifted on their apparatus of surveillance, what methods have and will they use to suppress militant workers and revolutionary socialists?



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact