

Health Care: The Romanow Report

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Roy's version

Political views of former Saskatchewan premier shaped by Tommy Douglas

By ALLISON LAWLOR
Globe and Mail Update

In the days after announcing he was stepping down as leader of the Saskatchewan New Democratic Party and resigning from politics after more than 30 years, Roy Romanow said he wasn't sure what he would do next, except, perhaps, write a book.

As it turned out, the long-time premier of Saskatchewan didn't have much time for reflection. Less than seven months after announcing his resignation in September 2000, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien came calling with a request he couldn't turn down.

On April 4, 2001, Mr. Chretien appointed him to head a national commission on medicare with the mandate to recommend measures to ensure the long-term sustainability of Canada's medicare system.

With that appointment, the Prime Minister granted Mr. Romanow his long-time wish. For months he had been lobbying to head up some form of national commission on medicare. But until then, he had been resisted, the Prime Minister pressing him to run federally instead.

But Mr. Romanow, who was 61 at the time, wasn't interested in running for the Liberals in the coming federal election. He stated at the time that he could never turn his back on his party.

"I think he really believed in the principles of his party and had believed there is a difference between the New Democratic Party and the Liberals," said Howard Leeson, a politics professor at the University of Regina and former adviser to Mr. Romanow. (Prof. Leeson also served as Saskatchewan's deputy minister for Intergovernmental Affairs between 1978 and 1982 and 1993 to 1994).

Mr. Romanow had also turned down several requests from his own party to run federally.

"His heart was always in provincial politics. He was not tempted to go to the federal level even though there were offers," Prof. Leeson told globeandmail.com.

Mr. Romanow's political views were shaped as a student of the late Tommy Douglas, giving him a deep commitment to social causes - public health



Roy Romanow at the 1999 Western Premiers' Conference. Photo: Chuck Stody/CP

Quick Facts

Born: Saskatoon. He is secretive about his birth date.

Education: Graduated from the University of Saskatchewan with Arts and Law degrees.

Politics: First elected to the Saskatchewan Legislature as a rookie MLA in 1967 and reelected in 1971, 1975, and 1978.

Between 1971 and 1982, he served as deputy premier of Saskatchewan, throughout those 11 years he also served as the province's attorney general.

In 1987, he became leader of the Saskatchewan New Democratic Party and premier of the province on Nov. 1, 1991.

He retired from politics in February 2001. In April of that same year, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien appointed him to head the Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada.

Personal: Married to Eleanore, no children

How would you rate the Canadian health-care system?

- Excellent
- Above average
- Average
- Below average
- Poor

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care being one of them. When Mr. Romanow got into politics in the 1960s, the medicare question was big in Saskatchewan, and it remained with him throughout his 33-year political career, in a sense becoming a cornerstone of his public life.

"He firmly believes in the medicare system, believes that we have something unique in Canada that we should keep," Prof. Leeson said. "I think he thought that he could do something here."

The health-care commission may well end up being one of the points he considers the highlights of his long public career, Prof. Leeson said.

First elected as a rookie MLA in 1967, he was re-elected in 1971, 1975 and 1978.

Between 1971 and 1982, he served as Saskatchewan's deputy premier in the NDP government of premier of Allan Blakeney. Throughout those 11 years, he also served as attorney general.

In 1979, he was appointed the province's first minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and was later one of the key players in the federal-provincial negotiations, which resulted in the Constitutional Accord of November, 1981. Three years later he co-authored a book on those negotiations called "Canada Notwithstanding."

"I suspect he will be remembered most for his role in the repatriation of the constitution I think that was a highlight in his political life," Prof. Leeson said.

He was defeated in 1982, along with the government of then-premier Allan Blakeney, when voters punished the NDP leadership for being preoccupied with federal-provincial issues, and for failing to look after affairs back home when energy prices and interest rates were skyrocketing.

That singular electoral defeat was a lesson Mr. Romanow never forgot. Once rejected by the voters, he questioned whether that was the end for him politically, Prof. Leeson said. "I think he came back mostly at the urging of his colleagues."

Re-elected in 1986, he led the NDP Opposition until 1991 when he defeated the governing Tories, led by their Progressive Conservative premier, Grant Devine, and became premier of Saskatchewan. After becoming premier, and in the conservative spirit of Prairie socialism, he turned his attention to getting the province's fiscal house in order.

During the 1990s, Mr. Romanow was difficult to categorize in terms of his ideology, Prof. Leeson said. After taking over a virtually bankrupt province, Mr. Romanow had to take some tough measures to balance the books, which meant raising taxes and cutting costs, including the closing or conversion of 52 mostly rural hospitals. He later argued that there was not an inherent contradiction between his economic policies and his social commitment.

He argued that his government's fiscal conservatism was a means to an end. "The reason we sacrificed so much in the early years of our administration was to ensure that we could one day rebuild the social and physical infrastructure of the province," Mr. Romanow wrote in an essay in *The Globe and Mail* in 2000.

Born in Saskatoon, Mr. Romanow was raised in the city's Ukrainian community. With Ukrainian as his first language, he didn't learn to speak English until he was about seven years old, said Prof. Leeson, who is also a personal friend of Mr. Romanow. Described as a "home-town" man, he and his wife Eleanore, still call Saskatoon home. They have no children.

Mr. Romanow graduated with Arts and Law degrees from the University of Saskatchewan. One story he is known to recount is how, as a law student in Saskatoon during the 1962 doctors strike, he left his summer job, jumped into his friend's Volkswagen and drove to Regina to do battle. He drove around Mr. Douglas and carried Mr. Blakeney's bags. And within five years the young volunteer was a member of the legislature.

"He is very, very bright and very committed to both Canada and public service," Prof. Leeson, said, adding that the combination of the two sustained him through a long and successful political career.

After delivering his long-awaited health-care report, what comes next for Mr. Romanow? He has been offered positions at both the University of Regina and University of Saskatchewan and will likely not face a shortage of other offers in the future. Maybe this time around, he will

get the opportunity to, perhaps, write his book.

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