

TOMMY C. DOUGLAS'S RESPONSE TO THE REMOVAL OF THE SHEPHERD CHILDREN

The following story illustrates 1940s broad application and enforcement of the 1894 amendments to the *Indian Act*, which gave authority to an Indian agent or justice of the peace to remove any "Indian child between six and sixteen years of age" who was thought to be "not being properly cared for or educated, and that the parent, guardian or other person having charge or control of such child, is unfit or unwilling to provide for the child's education" to place such a child in an industrial or boarding school. Under this legislation, poverty became a legitimate reason for removing Indigenous children from their homes. In 1946, Saskatchewan Premier Tommy Douglas protested the removal of two children from their home at Moose Mountain Reserve to a residential school in Manitoba, even though a day school existed on their reserve. Indian Affairs argued that the family's home conditions were such that the children were better off in residential school. Douglas wrote that "although the family lived in a small shack, it was as well kept and as large as other homes on the reserve, and the children were as well-cared-for on the reserve as at the residential school":

In September 1946, Saskatchewan Premier T. C. Douglas telegraphed federal Mines and Resources Minister J. A. Glen, the minister responsible for Indian Affairs, to protest the removal of two children from the Moose Mountain Reserve [[White Bear](#)] at Carlyle, Saskatchewan to the Brandon school in Manitoba by the Mounted Police. Douglas said the parents, Mr. and Mrs. Shepherd, wanted their children at home, where, he said, there was space for them in the local day school.²⁶ Indian Affairs argued that the family's home conditions were such that the children were better off in residential school.

At least one of the Shepherd children did not agree. In December 1946, Douglas once more wrote on behalf of the Shepherd family. Clifford Shepherd had run away, returning home by hitchhiking and walking through a blizzard, arriving poorly clothed and weakened. Two other boys from the reserve had also run away from that school, causing considerable concern to their parents, who believed the children "are not properly cared for, that they do not receive sufficient supervision and training, and that the food is inadequate." Douglas wrote that although the family lived in a small shack, it was as well kept and as large as other homes on the reserve, and the children were as well-cared-for on the reserve as at the residential school.²⁷ In affidavits submitted to Indian Affairs, John Shepherd (Clifford's father) and D. Pewean, the father of another boy who had run away from the school, complained of the poor treatment their children received at the Brandon school. In sending the affidavits to Ottawa, J. P. B. Ostrander, the inspector of Indian agencies in Saskatchewan, wrote that although he did not consider the affidavits to be of value, he thought the accusations should be investigated. He noted, "I have had other complaints of a similar nature about the action of Reverend Strapp [the Brandon school principal]," and thought they might explain the numerous cases of truancy at the school.²⁸

The conflict between Clifford Shepherd and Strapp continued into 1947. On January 11, 1947, Indian Affairs official A. G. Hamilton reported that in December, upon return from his most recent attempt to run away, Clifford Shepherd had fought back when ordered to report to the school dormitory. As a result, he was taken there by force. Once there, Strapp had held him on the bed while another student was sent to fetch the regulation strap, which was used to discipline him. Since then, the boy had been confined to the dormitory. Strapp said that if he did not keep Shepherd locked up, "he will take one of these smaller boys away with him and that they might freeze in a snow storm during the night." Strapp requested that a number of troublesome students be transferred to schools in Alberta. In response to the request, Indian Affairs official Bernard Neary said the department did not believe in transferring students except in an emergency.²⁹ Saskatchewan Premier Douglas intervened in the case once again, urging that Clifford Shepherd be sent home to his parents.³⁰ Hamilton agreed, saying Shepherd, who would not promise to stop running away, should be discharged.³¹ He was discharged on January 28, 1947.³² Later that year, Douglas also raised concerns about the harshness of disciplinary measures used in residential schools: "Frankly, I was shocked to learn of the corporal punishment which is being administered in Indians schools." He asked "if it is customary to give children a short haircut as a punishment. It appears that this is also a common method of endeavouring to discipline children. Personally, I am not at all surprised that a spirited boy, treated in this manner, would become more recalcitrant than ever."³³

Government and church officials were quick to fend off outside criticism. In response to Douglas's complaints, United Church official George Dorey wrote to Indian Affairs, "If Mr. Douglas accepts the statements of the Carlyle Indians at their face value, without further investigation, all I can say is that he will have plenty to do looking after the Indians in Saskatchewan without being able to give very much time to his duties as Premier."³⁴



T. C. Douglas (1944-1961), Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan ©M. West, Regina, West's Studio Collection/R-WS15159-1

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School children learning to light a fire at Treaty 4 Gathering, September 2016. Photo by Shuana Niessen