

# **The BLACK C o m m e n t a t o r**

An independent weekly internet magazine  
dedicated to the movement for economic justice,  
social justice and peace - Providing commentary,  
analysis and investigations on issues affecting  
African Americans and the African world.

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**Mouseland:**  
**A 60 year old parable for our time**  
**By John Funicello**  
**BlackCommentator.com Columnist**

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*Note: This week Brother Funicello's "Solidarity America" column is presented as our cover story and part 41 of the **BC** series about Single-Payer Healthcare. Click [here](#) to read any of the articles in this special BC series on Single-Payer Healthcare.*

The issue of health care for all in America is a recurring one for the generations. Theodore Roosevelt thought that providing care for everyone was a good idea.

That was a century ago. For more recent generations, there was President Harry Truman, then President Lyndon Johnson, there was President Bill Clinton and now, President Barack Obama. They all thought providing health care for all was an idea whose time has come.

Sometimes, a good idea has to travel the birth canal many times before it actually can be born. Universal health care is one of those things.

Europeans look with astonishment at our latest go-round about providing health care for all of the people. They, like a large percentage of Americans, believe access to health care is a human right, not a privilege.

Sadly, in America, health care *is* a privilege and nearly 50 million are without the financial wherewithal to get help and treatment when they need it. If health care is a

right, then the U.S. is a country that daily violates the human rights of so many millions and is responsible for hundreds of deaths every day.

It isn't just the deaths of women, men, and children that is so shocking—and that it happen every day—but it is the suffering that may go on for months or years that accompanies each one of those deaths.

These things are not a consideration for those who oppose health care for all, such as HR 676, Expanded and Improved Medicare for All, which has been picking up the support of more and more labor organizations, elected officials, doctors and other medical practitioners, as well as the people.

In the past 60 years, it just "wasn't the time" to pursue health care for all. There was always some other important consideration. But, there are always other important considerations: wars, natural disasters, economic downturns (or economic disasters). If one looks for "other important considerations," there is always one around to make it easy to say "it's not time" and we should fight health care for all, and put it off for another generation.

Canada's Medicare—health care for all—started in somewhat the same way, but their plan for universal coverage started in the Province of Saskatchewan, under the leadership of then-Premier Tommy Douglas, one of Canada's best-known political leaders, who started his public life in Ottawa in 1936. After that, Medicare became a national program.

He became involved in Saskatchewan politics, becoming premier (akin to a governor in the U.S.). Always, though, he believed that human rights and needs should be placed above power and profit. And that did set him apart from many politicians of his day—as it would place him apart from about half or more of the national political leadership in the U.S. today, especially when it comes to universal health care.

In a 1944 speech, he told the story of politics and what had to be done to change it, by way of a tale that he delivered as "The Story of Mouseland." He wasn't the first to tell the story, but he certainly told it most effectively.

Since nobody is likely to tell the story in the same way, here it is as he told it:

*It's the story of a place called Mouseland. Mouseland was a place where all the little mice lived and played, were born and died. And they lived much the same as you and I do.*

*They even had a Parliament. And every four years they had an election. Used to walk to the polls and cast their ballots. Some of them even got a ride to the polls. And got a ride for the next four years afterwards too. Just like you and me.*

*And every time on Election Day all the little mice used to go to the ballot box and they used to elect a government. A government made up of big, fat, black cats.*

*Now if you think it strange that mice should elect a government made up of cats, you just look at the history of Canada for last 90 years and maybe you'll see that they weren't any stupider than we are.*

*Now I'm not saying anything against the cats. They were nice fellows.*

*They conducted their government with dignity. They passed good laws—that is, laws that were good for cats.*

*But the laws that were good for cats weren't very good for mice. One of the laws said that mouseholes had to be big enough so a cat could get his paw in. Another law said that mice could only travel at certain speeds—so that a cat could get his breakfast without too much effort.*

*All the laws were good laws. For cats.*

*But, oh, they were hard on the mice. And life was getting harder and harder. And when the mice couldn't put up with it any more, they decided something had to be done about it. So they went en masse to the polls. They voted the black cats out. They put in the white cats.*

*Now the white cats had put up a terrific campaign. They said: "All that Mouseland needs is more vision." They said: "The trouble with Mouseland is those round mouseholes we got. If you put us in we'll establish square mouseholes." And they did. And the square mouseholes were twice as big as the round mouseholes, and now the cat could get both his paws in.*

*And life was tougher than ever. And when they couldn't take that anymore, they voted the white cats out and put the black ones in again. Then they went back to the white cats. Then to the black cats. They even tried half black cats and half white cats.*

*And they called that coalition.*

*They even got one government made up of cats with spots on them: they were cats that tried to make a noise like a mouse but ate like a cat.*

*You see, my friends, the trouble wasn't with the colour of the cat. The trouble was that they were cats. And because they were cats, they naturally looked after cats instead of mice.*

*Presently there came along one little mouse who had an idea. My friends, watch out for the little fellow with an idea.*

*And he said to the other mice, "Look fellows, why do we keep on electing a government made up of cats? Why don't we elect a government made up of mice?"*

*"Oh," they said, "he's a Bolshevik. Lock him up!"*

*So they put him in jail.*

*But I want to remind you: that you can lock up a mouse or a man but you can't lock up an idea.*

Every day, in the newspapers and on television and radio, we can read and see and hear exactly what Tommy Douglas was warning the people about with his Mouseland story.

With some exceptions, we have a Congress made up of people who are going to act in a manner that is best for them, not for their constituents. They will find every kind of rationale for their votes against universal health care. They will find every kind of

excuse. They will evade the questions of the people. Some will hide in their offices or in their vacation homes in the mountains, the seashore, or the islands off some warm coast.

All of the Republicans and many of the Democrats are reminded every day where their campaign contributions come from. Insurance companies and the medical care industry have deep pockets and they have in their pockets not only money, but a large number of national politicians, as well.

A plan such as HR 676, which is single-payer and universal, is a direct threat to the billions of dollars of profits that go each year to the medical-industrial complex. The CEOs who take their \$10 million or \$80 million per year out of those profits are not going to give in to a universal no-profit system without a fight.

That's what we're seeing now in the so-called town hall meetings held by (mostly) Democratic representatives, whose events are broken up by Americans screaming about "socialism" and declaring that, if the government gets involved in health care, it will be the end of America as we know it.

Many of them don't know that Medicare (health care coverage for those older than 65) is a single-payer universal program that is paid for by the government. Or that Medicare does its work five to seven times more efficiently than the for-profit medical industries. It's true that it doesn't cover dental care or vision care or most prescription drugs (except for those who opted in to the doughnut-hole system of the Bush Administration), but it is a program of the government that has proven itself to be beneficial to the common good.

Tommy Douglas was on to something and he knew it several generations ago. It's not new and it's not unique to Canada or any other country. It's part of the human condition.

In America, as in other places and times, the society of mice has continually elected cats to govern them. There is a preponderance of them in Congress today, and they'll keep on voting to keep the cats in power.

The one thing that they count on is that the mice won't notice that they are cats. But, when the people pay attention to the little mouse with an idea, they might put the cats out and the mice in—it could happen and, when it does, we'll see profound changes in the way government does its business. At least, for starters, we might see universal single-payer health care, the only reasonable way to go.

(Note: To hear Tommy Douglas (1904-86), in his Mouseland speech, click [here](#) to watch an animation of the speech and the story, as only TD could tell it. The animation is introduced by actor Kiefer Sutherland who is a grandson of Douglas.)

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