

Hon. R. B. Horner: Honourable senators, I wish to say a few words on the motion to set up a committee of the Senate to investigate the Doukhobor problems. In proposing that such a committee be set up, the honourable senator from Toronto-Spadina (Hon. Mr. Croll) displayed a deep interest in this problem.

When I left the Ottawa Valley as a young man, and went west, I got firsthand information regarding the Doukhobors and the elaborate territory that was allotted to them. I only wish I had a picture of the many villages and the beautiful farmland allotted to these people along the banks of the North Saskatchewan River. Some of the finest townships in the west were set aside for the Doukhobors.

When they came to Canada in 1898 they were guaranteed, as the honourable senator from Toronto-Spadina pointed out, that they would never be asked to take part in military action. They were given territory and privileges that were unavailable to any other class of people in Canada or anywhere in the world. But the Doukhobors were beset with thievery by their leaders who misused their money. They were allowed to settle in beautiful villages with wide main streets, hundreds of houses on some of them, while every Canadian homesteader was forced to live on his homestead for at least six months of the year for so many years.

They were allowed to live in the villages and cultivate whatever land they wished. They held this land from 1898 until 1907. Naturally, just as there would appear to be now, there was a great crusade or political upheaval in the country and questions were raised as to why these people should be left in this position.

At that time, for some reason or other—perhaps in order to keep absolute control they were ordered by their leader not to take the oath of allegiance. Faced with this situation, the Government did everything possible to find a solution. They got a clergyman and a commission to go among the Doukhobors, explaining to them that although they would be asked to take the oath of allegiance they could still live in their villages. They refused to take the oath, and finally the Government was forced into the position where they had to make an announcement.

May I say that a few settlements grew up, but all this land was reserved for ordinary homesteaders, and it was amongst the finest in Canada. It was a beautiful sight, to go down to the villages and see the haystacks.

They had a two-year supply of hay. The stacks were built to a great height, in fact so high that they had to erect scaffolding on the sides. They always had plenty of help in preparing their hay—the women raked it until it looked beautiful and would shed rain for years.

The thing I complain about is that they were given other special privileges that I do not think were agreed upon. They were allowed to register their own births and marriages; they had their own system of marriage and divorce. Now they appear to want to retain these privileges in spite of the Government's wishes. In other words, they want as little governmental control as possible.

The expression of opinion I have heard from the really good men among them today—men whom I could not distinguish from any ordinary good Canadian citizen—is that in the past the Government has not dealt with them severely enough. Recently one such man returned from British Columbia after the arrests had been made, and I said to him, "Well, Alec, what are they doing?" He said, "I think they mean business now. We are now going to get rough with those fellows, which is what we should have done long ago."

The honourable senator mentioned the fact that they even tried separating the children from their parents. It was never the intention merely to separate them. The only reason this happened was that the parents refused to send the children to school. The Government took the children from those parents who refused to send them to school, and the Government built a school and kept the children under its care. A few years ago that problem appeared to be settled; the parents agreed to send their children to school, and they were returned to their homes.

A few of them have their leader in South America, and they give money to him in just the same way as they did to the older Peter Veregin. This leader has bought himself a big estate down there, and has given his followers orders to make all the trouble they can.

Honourable senators, what I really rose to say was that rather than rendering the Doukhobors a service by forming this committee, we would be doing them a great disservice. They would be clamouring to come down here and be heard, and there would be no end to it. I say that rather than helping them to find a solution to the problem we would be doing them a great injury by setting up a special committee.

On motion of Hon. Mr. Roebuck, debate adjourned.