

Open Letter to Sir Thomas White, Acting Prime Minister of Canada.

8 University Crescent,
Toronto, 1st May, 1919.

Sir,—

I desire to appeal to the high-minded public of Canada to prevent, as they can, if they will, the perpetration of what appears to me to be a monstrous national crime. It is well known that between 7,000 and 8,000 Doukhobors emigrated from Russia in 1899. The oppression they endured from the Government there was well known and they applied to be allowed to come to this country. They made two conditions, both of which were accepted by the Minister of the Interior of the time. The first of these conditions—exemption from military service—was embodied in an Order-in-Council. The second condition—freedom to settle in villages—was as fully accepted, although it was not embodied in so formal a document. When they came the people were received with open arms. The immigration was the largest which had ever come to Canada in one mass. The fame of Canada as the refuge of the unfortunate was spread and even trumpeted throughout the world. Other circumstances, no doubt conspired, but the Doukhobor immigration represented the beginning of a great movement from Europe which was looked upon at the time as of the utmost importance in building up this country. The European immigrants built the railways in the North-west and contributed enormously to the increase of production. Had this immigration not taken place it is doubtful if the North-west would now have been in the economical position in which it finds itself.

Whether the disturbance to their village and family life due to the frequent harassing conduct of the Russian Government affected their minds or not, it is the fact that for some years before and for some years after their arrival in Canada, the Doukhobors were subject to outbreaks of religious fanaticism. These outbreaks did not, however, affect more than from one-fifth to one-quarter of the people and in no case were the outbreaks of long duration. There have been no outbreaks for several years.

When the arrangements were being made about their settlement, I was invited by the Department of the Interior to make some suggestions; and I suggested that the land allotted to the Doukhobors should be on the outer limit of what was considered by the Government surveyors, at that time, as suitable for practicable settlement. I pointed out that the fact of their being a "hard knot" in a country otherwise occupied by farmers cultivating individually, would not be so inconvenient as it might be if the settlement were in the heart of the country, and that the area intervening between the existing settlements and the Doukhobor lands would fill up all the more

readily, that they were beyond that area. This suggestion was adopted, and the anticipation proved to be correct. The intervening area did fill up very rapidly and the lands quickly rose in value. What I did not anticipate was that the Government would break faith with the people and would so soon as it was subjected to pressure by land speculators, seek to deprive the Doukhobors of the lands which had been given to them, or explicitly reserved for them. Had I done so nothing would have induced me to encourage any immigrants to come to this country.

The process of attack upon the Doukhobor lands began in 1906. It is necessary to explain certain peculiarities of the people which laid them open to the attack and left them defenceless before it. ~~These peculiarities were that~~ About three-fourths of them practised rigid co-operation. They bought collectively and they sold collectively. The local merchants disliked them because they did not profit by their proximity on account of the purchases of the Doukhobors being made principally in Toronto and Vancouver, where, soon after their settlement, they began to buy on a large scale. The local farmers professed to believe that the sale of Doukhobor produce reduced prices.

Together with the land speculators—many farmers being among these—and aided by the local politicians, the groups mentioned organized a raid upon Sir Wilfrid Laurier and Mr. Frank Oliver. Neither of these had ever been in the Doukhobor Settlement, nor did they know anything about the people or their character. The Doukhobors had no votes because they objected to the oath of allegiance—conceiving that to swear it, gave the Government a power over them which they could not understand. For this reason their case was regarded with cynical indifference. Instead of dealing with the question in a diplomatic manner, the Government in 1907, simply cancelled the Doukhobor grants and took away from the people nearly 400,000 acres of land. Large areas of that land had been brought into cultivation by the people. Technically the Government may have acted within their powers—morally, their action was without justification. One of the peculiarities of the Doukhobors is adherence to the maxim of Tolstoy, by whom in recent years they have been much influenced—that maxim is "Resist not evil." They accepted the situation and of course believed that like the Government of Russia—the Canadian Government was simply an instrument of oppression. They decided that even the small portion of land left to them was held on very insecure tenure and therefore they should buy land instead of trusting to Government grants. They bought large tracts of land in British Columbia from and with the knowledge of the Government of that province. They were well advised, at all events for the time, for in 1912 further encroachment upon their Saskatchewan lands was made, at the instance of Conservative politicians and others.

Some thousands of the Doukhobors were transferred to the British Columbia lands. There they engaged in the intensive agriculture to which they had been accustomed in Russia, this form of agriculture not being possible in northern Saskatchewan. They established large fruit farms, built jam factories and produced on a large scale. During the war they presented the Government with great quantities of jam as their contribution to the war funds.

Now comes the crime--these peaceable if obstinate and peculiar people are being forced out of their purchased lands as they were forced out of their homesteads by the same conspiracy of local tradesmen, local farmers, local politicians and local speculators. These people have entertained the idea of exploiting the returned soldier in order to deprive the Doukhobors of their cultivated lands. The intention of the scheme is as obvious as it is discreditable. On the plea that the returned soldier must have land, they have induced the Government to buy out the Doukhobors at forced sale, and then to give the returned soldiers grants of their land. The experience of such military grants in this country and elsewhere, is that the soldier quickly realizes upon his grant and then the opportunity of the speculator comes. He buys the grants thus suddenly thrown upon the market, at a low price, and holds the land for a profit, meanwhile allowing it to fall out of cultivation.

There is plenty of land in British Columbia and in the North-west for all the returned soldiers who genuinely desire to settle down to an agricultural life. They should be generously treated in the distribution of land but there can be no sound policy in turning out established settlers who are making a success of intensive cultivation and who have bought and paid for their land believing in the good faith of the people of Canada and in their respect for civil rights. The soldier, unless he is also a politician, may find his grant similarly expropriated on the plea that he has not fulfilled precisely all the conditions. This country needs immigrants to occupy its wide spaces; how can they be expected to come, if the prospect lies before them of being deprived on one excuse or another of their homesteads or even of the lands they have paid for?

What are the dispossessed Doukhobors to do? They cannot go back to Russia, the conditions there would be for them not any better than they are here. It is useless for them to think of buying land in this country, because some plausible excuse might at any time be invented to deprive them of it in the same way as is being done now. They must inevitably be turned into vagrants--unable to obtain land in a country where there are millions of acres waiting for the plough.

The life of these unfortunate people has been again and again torn up by the roots, not only in Russia, but in this country, by the action of the respective Governments. It is little wonder that they distrust the organization of the State. Their experience of it has been that when for some reason its attention is spasmodically drawn to them, it is on occasion merely an instrument of oppression and disturbance.

The short-sighted policy of the Government with regard to the Doukhobors during the past thirteen years has borne the fruit, that this adverse or even perverse view of the State has been strongly confirmed in the minds of the Doukhobors, and if the policy is further persisted in must affect in a similar way others who are not so simple-minded as they are.

The distrust inspired in their minds by the past actions of the Government has a great deal to do with their objections to the education of their children, as well as with their isolation from their neighbours. They

may be self-righteous and afflicted with spiritual pride; but they feel, and have reason to feel, that they have been, and are now being, treated without regard to justice by their neighbours, and through their influence, by the Government.

These proceedings have nothing in common with a policy of "reconstruction," on the contrary they amount to deliberate destruction. If the Government expropriated the fruit farms in the Niagara District, turned the farmers adrift, and bestowed the land in grants to returned soldiers with liberty to sell to speculators, the case would be precisely similar. Care for our returned men is a national duty; it cannot with justice be made a special burden upon a few. Disregard of civil rights is an infectious disease. When a Government breaks the fundamental laws of a country and of society, it is little wonder that law in general should be held in light esteem.

If Canada is ever to be emancipated from slavery to the petty politician whose eye is bent exclusively on the main chance, this can only be done by a wider and less self-interested public opinion making its influence felt upon the Government. This seems to be an occasion when such influence ought somehow to be made manifest.

If there is anything to be done, there is no time to be lost. Appraisers sent by the Dominion Government are already on the spot estimating the value of the land which is intended to be confiscated. The whole matter has been rushed with indecent haste.

I would suggest that the Dominion Government institute without delay a serious inquiry conducted by competent persons into the whole circumstances of the case. Canada cannot afford to have its public character compromised by a transaction which will not bear the light of day. The fact that the people who have been and are being again plundered, are innocent, inoffensive, industrious people unacquainted with political guile, ought to make every high-minded citizen of this country insist upon justice being done them and upon their being left in the enjoyment of their peaceful and productive life.

Yours truly,

JAMES MAVOR.