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Government Apology for Historical Wrongs Against Doukhobor Community

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IRISE TODAY TO ADDRESS an historic wrong. Too many people have waited too long for this moment in our Legislature. Members of the Doukhobor community arrived in Canada 125 years ago. They sought refuge after enduring persecution in czarist Russia. Some families eventually settled in British Columbia, many establishing communities in the Kootenay-Boundary region of our province. The newcomers had beliefs and customs that were different than those of their neighbours. Yet despite those differences, they and their neighbours built flourishing communities.

Let me begin these remarks by recognizing with thanks the many contributions Doukhobors have made in building this beautiful province that we live in.

In the first half of the previous century, the provincial government levied fines, seized communal property for infractions like school absenteeism. Between 1931 and 1959, hundreds of Sons of Freedom members were convicted and handed sentences of up to three years.

After many years of unrest and troubled relations, the province forcibly removed children from their homes and communities. These children were placed in forced education facilities, including a former sanitarium in New Denver. They were mistreated physically and psychologically. Parents and other adult relatives could only visit their kids through the barrier of a chain-link fence. As a father, I ache imagining that pain, where children paid the price for the conflicts of adults.

Constitutional protections would not let that happen today, and it should not have happened then. These actions caused immense and immeasurable harm. They also created anxiety for the broader Doukhobor community, even to families whose children were not seized.

There is no more sacred a relationship than that of parent and child. That relationship was broken for an entire community. The resulting harms have echoed for generations.

The province of British Columbia recognizes the hurt and the trauma experienced by the Sons of Freedom and by the broader Doukhobor community. Today, on behalf of the province of British Columbia, we acknowledge and apologize for these past injustices.

To build on this apology, the province will be contributing \$10 million to support the Doukhobor community. This initiative will help people hurt by these historical wrongs and will help prevent similar occurrences in the future. Funding will be allocated to survivors, to provide counselling and other wellness initiatives to make their lives better and healthier.

There are survivors here today and family members. You've travelled a very long way to be here, many of you. Thank you for being here today. My commitment to you and to all those who couldn't be here today is that we will work with you to make this right.

Source: Hansard Blues, Legislative Assembly, Draft Report of Debates. Available at <https://www.leg.bc.ca/documents-data/debate-transcripts/42nd-parliament/5th-session/20240227am-House-Blues>.