

Rising rhetoric of a new "yellow peril"

by kevin harding - Monday, March 25, 2013

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The 1921 "Ethnic Outreach" Campaign
(Courtesy Past Tense Vancouver)

The complaints are familiar - "Asian immigrants are taking our jobs," "Asian immigrants are buying our property and keeping us out."

Instead of being [complaints found](#) in the Richmond Review's letters-to-the-editor section, however, these are the complaints that were found in a Liberal Party advertisement in 1921 that was posted on a Vancouver history site.

Our history - the history of Vancouver, BC, and Canada - especially that of Asian immigration is one fraught with historical wrongs. The [Chinese head tax](#), the [Chinese Exclusion Act](#), the [Japanese internment](#), the [Komagata Maru](#), all are racially-based historical wrongs that we continue to live with today.

While we don't quite have an [Asiatic Exclusion League](#) actively campaigning today against Asian immigration today, the complaints that prompted the Liberal Party of 1921 to pledge to keep British Columbia "white" are still around, and they seem to keep rising in strength. Indeed, it appears that there is a rise of a new rhetoric of ["yellow peril."](#)

Property speculation: They're taking our land!

The new yellow peril rhetoric is immediately observable in Vancouver's perennial hot-topic debate: the housing crisis and property speculation. It has almost become vogue to enter the debate on the housing crisis with the argument that one of the primary reasons that people cannot afford to live in the Lower Mainland is because our market has been distorted by [foreign buyers](#) - [property speculators from places like Hong Kong](#), from China, from places that are Asian and have Asian people living in them.

It's so prevalent a myth that Vancouver condo marketing firm [MAC Marketing Solutions was recently busted using its own employees to pose as Asian students whose rich parents were going to buy property for them](#). Apparently, MAC thought that the way to tell their story best was to play into the prevalent myth. Sadly, even 'progressive' politicians and commentators get sucked into this myth, tweeting and campaigning about the dangers of "foreign" buyers purchasing up all of Vancouver's real estate.

The truth, of course, is somewhat different from the rumoured "[yellow peril](#)" snapping up all of Vancouver's over-priced, under-sized, and completely unaffordable housing. While property speculation as a function of an overheated property market is truly one of the root-est causes of Vancouver's constant housing crisis, it's hardly because of Asians buying our homes.

[UBC professor Andy Yan wrote an excellent report using BC Assessment Data that showed that only 1% of property assessments were sent to addresses in Asia](#) - 0.6% to China, 0.3% to Japan, and 0.2% to Hong Kong. This is a rather reliable indicator of "foreign" ownership - if the tax assessments are being sent to people who live, well, elsewhere. 93.8% of the BC Assessment slips reported on were mailed in Canada.

Instead of blaming Asians, perhaps we should be blaming Burnaby residents. Or those Missioners. Or the Saskatchewanians. Certainly not the Chinese. [But don't tell faux-progressive Geoff Meggs - who is concerned about foreign investment. All 1% of it.](#)

One truth of this matter is that it isn't foreign buyers that are causing this issue. Unless you count rich Canadians, who have enough disposable income to property speculate, who might be Asian. But then, that's a twisted definition of foreign, isn't it? Not that that's stopping anyone.

Labour: [They're taking our jobs!](#)

The scene is a rocky mountain face. Chinese workers, speaking Mandarin, Cantonese, and Taishanese, who have travelled to Canada for work, are toiling away, digging and blasting tunnels, carting away piles of rubble.

[Is this the HD Mining coal mine in northern BC?](#) Nope. [It's the construction of the railway to Vancouver, in the late 1800s and early 1900s](#). One of the first times that Canada wholesale imported temporary foreign workers - without regard for their lives - was for the construction of the CPR. Yet another historical wrong in BC, where the Chinese workers were seen as essentially disposable, doing work that no white person was apparently willing to do. Or at least that was probably the justification.

And it's the justification again today, as multinational resource extraction firms set up shop in northern BC and bring in more temporary foreign workers. Neoliberal globalization and free-range free-trade has allowed companies to cross borders easier than diplomats on trade missions, and they are after natural resources. They are also after the most profit they can get, so the mining companies in northern BC have glommed onto the idea of temporary foreign workers again - [because they can be paid lower wages](#), don't get the same benefits as Canadian workers, and are often un-unionized and unprotected.

The union angle might have allowed the labour movement in Canada to step up and organize the temporary foreign workers, if they had argued that everyone who risks life and limb in Canada deserves the same rights, the same union wage, the same union fee, and the same lunch break.

Well, *might* have.



Promised review of Temporary Worker Program fails to deliver as more TFW permits requiring Mandarin language to work in north east mines revealed

[Sadly, BC labour has rushed to a predictably quasi-xenophobic position arguing that jobs should go to "Canadians first."](#) pointing at the fact that temporary foreign workers speak Mandarin and that the multinational corporations (and their capital) that come from China do too.

Radio ads sponsored by the BC Federation of Labour trot out "Canadians first!" rhetoric that hides xenophobic and racist stereotypes that are the same as the Liberal campaign ad from 1921.

One of the truths of this matter is that part of the issue is that neoliberalism has removed borders for capital, and multinational corporations now float freely across national divisions. Whenever they encounter wages that are too high - like in BC - they do what they can to bring them down. In the case of northern BC mines like HD Mining's site, the temporary foreign worker program allows companies to import labour cheaply - [which is sadly similar to the past history of work in BC that involved drilling and digging through rock.](#)

Richmond's Signs: [Speak white!](#)

Perhaps you've heard of the campaign in Richmond to ~~ban~~ require [Chinese-language signs](#) to display English translations. Couched in language about ensuring that retail shops and business in Richmond are "accessible to all" (read: in English), the campaign has garnered the support of at least 1,000 people who have apparently signed a petition calling on the Richmond City Council to pass a bylaw to require business to display signs in English, vis Québec's [Loi 101](#).

There is a certain easy logic that appears on the face of the issue, that of the sensibility of English-language signs, but it is flawed logic - there is no legal requirement in Richmond, Vancouver, or anywhere in BC for signs to be posted in specific languages. And indeed, while commentator Alise Mills fretted on CKNW on Friday, March 22, about violations of the [Official Languages Act](#) (which applies only to the federal government), and was outraged that Richmond's [bylaw officers](#) did not enforce it (the officers' job title, *Bylaw Enforcement Officers*, would tend to preclude their enforcing federal statute), businesses are free to post signs in whichever language they might like.

Richmond's "speak English" movement pretends to fight for equality and harmony. It does this by using noble language and appealing to falsities about "official languages." The movement, however, hides an ugly assertion that English is the only acceptable language for business. It hides an assertion that white people are so terrified and insulted by Chinese-language signs that they flee No. 3 road in terror. It hides an assertion that only English is appropriate in Canada.

Intriguingly, and as an aside, the same people who decry Richmond's so-called inaction on the apparent overflow of ??? Chinese-language signs would very likely also decry the imposition of French language laws in Montréal. But I digress.

The "speak English" movement hides, behind its noble language of ensuring accessibility to the declining percentage of the population that speaks only English, a fantastic amount of xenophobia and Anglo-supremacism. Couched in terms of "protecting Canadian culture" is a fear of Asian culture overtaking the settler culture that has colonized [Turtle Island](#). Hidden in the argument that we need to promote "racial harmony" is a fear that races other than white may dare assert their own identities.

Couched in Richmond's rising "speak white" movement is a rhetoric of racism and yellow peril.

Education: They're taking over our schools!

If taking our houses and our jobs, and not allowing us to speak English in stores in Richmond wasn't enough, [Maclean's Magazine bravely showed us that our universities might even be - gasp - too Asian.](#)

Playing up such stereotypes as model immigrants and the "Asian ethic" of playing piano, the violin, and getting straight-As, *Maclean's* ran an article that told us that Asians were taking over our universities.

Included in this fascinating analysis of racial harmony and the post-racial marvel that is Canada were assertions that some universities were just *too* Asian. After all, all the white kids apparently go to Queen's - why would you go to UBC if you weren't Chinese? The concern over Asians taking over our institutions of higher learning was palpable in the article in question. There seemed to be simply too many Asians in our universities.

While *Maclean's* has fully retreated, *ex post facto* changing the title of the article to "The Enrolment Controversy," the piece certainly exposed one leading edge of the new yellow peril - one that even Canada's spy agency, CSIS, has highlighted, when, along with [hinting that some BC politicians could be under "Asian influence," CSIS head Richard Fadden warned that Asian students at Canadian universities might be, well, learning things and taking knowledge back to Asia.](#)

Quick Wins: Appealing to both sides?

While the BC Liberals of 1921 might have pledged to keep British Columbia "white," "Today's BC Liberals" (their campaign name, apparently) are campaigning in a different direction. Embracing diversity, Premier Christy Clark has declared herself [Filipina à coeur](#), danced Bhangra, and adopted a Chinese name.

While attending multicultural events certainly makes electoral sense - and provides considerable access to good food - [it turns out that the BC Liberals were going even further.](#) In their "ethnic outreach" plans the BC Liberals pledged, in a leaked campaign document, to apologize for the historical wrongs and bring large ethnic events to Vancouver as a way to score "quick wins" amongst ethnic voters - and apparently win an election.

[While it seems the Head Tax apology has been derailed,](#) the Liberals are not apologizing for the ethnic outreach plan that gave rise to it, saying instead that ethnic outreach "just makes sense" in a diverse province. This argument is interesting, as it both recognizes the diverse population that inhabits our unceded Coast Salish Territories, but immediately tokenizes the very groups it claims to be embracing.

The media reporting of the "ethnic outreach" scandal, also known as "Quick Wins," has focused on the public money spent for partisan purposes. Indeed, this is a big thing, as it means that the Liberal government used public funds to conduct campaign work.

But missing in this analysis is the tokenistic approach the Liberals have taken to the migrant communities. The reasoning appears to be thus: if a politician (predominantly white, male, and old) dons "ethnic garb" and attends "ethnic events," the "ethnics" will vote for him.

This is an insultingly simplistic analysis that appeals to effectively tribal urges. Do I, as a person of predominantly Scottish and English heritage, vote for the politician who wears a kilt the best and makes the most impressive bangers-and-mash? Absolutely not. So why do we expect Asians to vote *en masse* for the politician who mangles Mandarin the best and smiles at a (hopefully imitation) shark fin dinner?

While this is perhaps the flip-side of the rising tide of "yellow peril" rhetoric, it gives rise to low-key complaints about "communities of influence" in politics, with the vaunted 'Indo-Canadian' community being so often seen as the kingmaker in candidate nominations, complete with complaints about buses of people of Indian heritage allegedly flooding nomination battles. There is where the yellow peril hides, both in its tokenistic pandering and its fear.

The real problems

The real problems that face all of us that have settled in Vancouver are not ones of the Asians versus the rest of us.

The housing crisis is real, and not because 1% of the properties are owned by people in Asia, but because housing is seen as a commodity to buy and flip for profit. While 93.8% of those who are purchasing property for investment live in Canada, we are blaming the miniscule less-than-one-percent who live across an ocean. This yellow peril is a way to distract from the fact that made-in-Canada policies have created a housing market that is too expensive and inaccessible. Our governments have created situations where a 600 square foot apartment can be sold for more than a million dollars, and no one from Hong Kong has forced this upon us. Why are we not looking for ways to solve the housing problem? Sadly, it's at least partially because we're too busy blaming the Asians that we are not thinking about, for example, [co-operative approaches to housing](#), where we could build housing that can be seen as co-operative and commonly held.

Instead of fighting for better employment conditions for everyone who works in BC, fair wages, better representation, and more jobs for all, we're busy blaming Asian workers who are imported under extremely exploitative temporary foreign worker programs. Instead of examining neoliberalism's hate-on for good working conditions, we're blaming the Chinese because our governments have allowed multinational corporations to skirt labour laws and hire guest workers at rock-bottom wages.

Instead of understanding the complex push and pull factors that lead families to migrate across the world in search of a better life and their arrival in communities where they are isolated, historically discriminated against, and not welcomed, we're busy fighting against communities that post signs in their own languages.

Instead of wondering why universities and colleges are forced to seek international students as cash cows who pay tens of thousands of dollars more in tuition (because our government has defunded education to the point where universities are begging for money), we're blaming Chinese students for taking our spots. Instead of asking why our public education system does not properly prepare students for university or the labour market (because our government has defunded the education system to the point where teachers are forced to buy books and supplies), we're blaming the Asian students who seek out education here (the very one our government does not sufficiently support).

Never mind the fact that so many Asians are also born-and-raised Canadians.

And at the same time that our politicians woo and flirt with overly simplistic and bordering-on-racist tokenistic approaches to the "ethnic vote," our rhetoric reflects a rejection and a fear of the other that has been so historically created. A yellow peril that our politics both actively seeks out but also creates a pressing fear of, in a terrifying back-and-forth.

The real problems are not the Asians, or the immigrants. So often, the problem is rooted in capitalism, in neoliberalism, and oppression. The socially constructed characteristic of race changes how these historical tensions are experienced, but does not substitute for the very real problems of capital's domination over every aspect of our lives.