

The Vancouver Food Policy Council And That Awkward Racist Guy

by Alex Tse - Saturday, January 25, 2014

<https://politicsrespun.org/2014/01/the-vancouver-food-policy-council-and-that-awkward-racist-guy/>



Mr. Bill Hard-done-by-those-coloured-people Zylmans. I bet even his strawberries are racist.

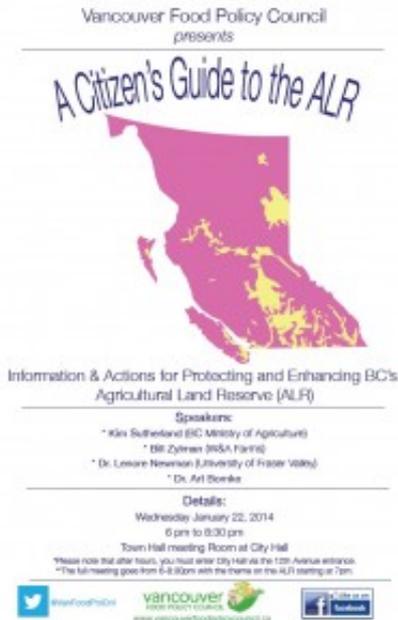
Please see the VFPC response at the end of this post.

I was really excited last Thursday to go to an event about farming in Vancouver. I'm really geeky about stuff like that. I think I'll forever be the only one of my friends who uses the hashtag [#AgMoreThanEver](#). I'm one of the few people I know that commit their entry-level wage (I don't even know many people with higher wages that do this) to fresh produce from the farmer's market. I even subscribe to newsletters from the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture, because you know, reading about mobile abattoirs and vegetable marketing workshops is totally relevant to a city girl like me.

The point is, I'm really passionate about farming. I want it to thrive in B.C. I care about the issues.

So when the Vancouver Food Policy Council (VFPC) organized [a panel discussion called "A Citizen's Guide to the Agricultural Land Reserve."](#) I had to be there. It's a critical point for farming right now in our province, and it all hinges on protecting farmland for future generations. It's my job as a citizen to be informed.

So I was really excited about learning more at the panel discussion until, not even 20 minutes into the meeting, Bill Zylmans, B.C. farming bigshot, finishes his presentation to the audience with this dramatic flourish: "There's not that many [of us] Caucasian [farmers] left."



The room got awkward, the applause was dry, but nobody said a word. Zylmans didn't even notice.

He later added another gem; of the 500 acres that Zylmans farms in Richmond, only 120 acres belongs to his family. "The rest," he said, "is owned by *offshore investors*. Figure out what that means. [The panelist from the Ministry] can't say that, but I can."

So ... if it's not already obvious why these comments are problematic: how many Caucasian farmers should Bill and other white men like him need to feel comfortable? What's wrong with having farmers reflect the ethnic diversity of the region that they live in? Are there *too many coloured people*? Should that make us uncomfortable?

Zylman's offshore comment is also a little misplaced. Yes, it's difficult for farmers to make a living if they cannot afford to have their own land, and that's a problem. But Zylman's comment hinted, again, at the fear of too much involvement from Foreign Coloured People.

One of the reasons why I didn't speak up at the meeting was because I really don't care whether or not people like Zylmans ever learn not to embarrass themselves in public with racist comments. And it's clear from Zylmans's attitude that he doesn't care either. Old white guys are gonna be old white guys. There's not much you can do for a determined racist.

It doesn't matter how racist Bill is because what matters is how the VFPC, an established and respected leader for the farming movement in Vancouver, reacts when a speaker they invited outs himself as a bigot. It's true that Zylmans is an important and knowledgeable figure when it comes to farming. He likely has a lot of valuable insight when it comes to B.C. agriculture. But this knowledge will not help the cause when it comes with so much racist baggage.

Here I was, so excited to learn about farming, but because of the colour of my skin I suddenly didn't feel welcome there anymore. Isn't my support for the cause just as valuable? What if I fulfilled my dream of

becoming a farmer one day, would I be *Too Asian* to farm in B.C.? Does Zylmans have any idea how much I've been advocating for local farm produce amongst my family and friends? What about [celebrated food hero Arzeena Hamir](#), who has done so much to speak up for saving farmland in B.C.? Shouldn't the success of her new farm in the Comox Valley be celebrated by farmers all over our province? Or is Hamir's farm a threat to Caucasian B.C. farmers?



You know white farmers have good reason to be afraid when the overwhelming majority of people that show up to a public farm policy meeting are white

Your movement cannot win if it fails to be inclusive. Here Zylmans was, saying the government needs to do this and the government needs to do that, and yet he didn't consider the political support that ethnic minorities could lend to the cause!

But again, it's okay for Zylmans to be racist. We don't have to take him seriously. What's not okay is if the Vancouver Food Policy Council continued to give a platform to racist speakers and to ask racist speakers to represent the cause. For the sake of the movement, the VFPC should distance themselves from Zylmans and not invite him to speak at future events.

=====

The Vancouver Food Policy Council response

We've been having email based conversation with the council over that last few days about this same issue, mainly Bill's comments and how we can address such a situation in the future, if it arises. We're also talking about how we can better ensure the VFPC meetings are a safe space for everyone. And we're talking about how to incorporate anti-oppression training into our council work.

At the February meeting, we'll make sure to include an update on our progress, and will start off the meeting by reminding all attendees and panelists that we expect them to be respectful in their comments.

The VFPC is working to plan a meeting in the upcoming months specifically discussing discrimination/oppression in the food system - perhaps highlighting some of the work being done locally. This was our intention previous to the meeting last Wednesday and it seems even more important now that we are having this discussion within the community. Its very complicated and emotional territory to tackle and as volunteers the VFPC has its limitations as a forum to do so. However, we want and need to communicate around this issue in order to understand how to bring a just and sustainable food system forward. And so, I put the invitation to you and your readers that if there are any ideas or energy we would gladly like to hear them (<http://www.vancouverfoodpolicycouncil.ca/contact-us/>).