

ISSUES & IDEAS

HOUSE PRICES



Planner Andy Yan's study on empty condos in the city found two-thirds of recent expensive west-side home sales went to people with non-Anglicized Chinese first names.

Nothing racist about housing study

Necessary info:
Collecting data on buyers' nationality is a way of getting at the causes of Vancouver's runaway house prices



Douglas Todd

Real estate developers were the first to charge "racism" in the early 1990s when many Metro Vancouver residents objected to old houses being razed and trees chopped down by wealthy newcomers.

Now — in the face of escalating demolitions of character homes and a growing crisis of housing affordability — Vancouver's mayor is the latest to resurrect the racist epithet.

Gregor Robertson used the incendiary term in reaction to a study by urban planner Andy Yan, which found two-thirds of recent expensive home sales on the city's west side went to people with non-Anglicized Chinese first names.

"What we don't need ... is the blaming of any one group of people — or any one kind of last name — for the challenge of housing affordability," Robertson said on his Facebook page.

"This is a public policy issue, not a race issue — and any confusion to the contrary only risks dividing our city and distracting Vancouver and our region from seeking the urgent action that is needed from the provincial and federal governments."

Earlier, Robertson, who also told reporters "I'm very concerned with the racist tones that are implied here," had called on the B.C. government to implement an anti-speculation tax on high-end properties and to limit "excessive vacancies" in unoccupied houses.

But was there anything about the study by Yan, who is acting head of Simon Fraser University's City Program and a planner at Bing Thom Architects, that was "racist"?

Leading Canadian figures in

anti-racism organizations, in applied ethics, in urban planning, in immigration consulting and other fields say, "No."

Before exploring their reasoning, it's worth acknowledging that instances of racism might be an unintended consequence of what Yan and four other studies have determined regarding the role of foreign-born millionaires and investor-class immigrants in fuelling Metro's astronomical prices.

Point Grey NDP MLA David Eby, who assisted Yan's research by collecting the land titles of 172 homes in Vancouver's west side, said Canadians need to stand on guard against a "few racists who crawl out of their caves ... to advance their own agenda."

But Eby suggested a fear of inciting bigots is no excuse to deny all the causes behind Metro's runaway housing prices. They include investor-class immigration programs that came out of Ottawa and continue through the backdoor of Quebec.

Since many people are confused about the meaning of the divisive term racist, which connotes superiority, Yan has publicly asked an important question: "I am curious about how the mayor defines racism."

Albert Lo, head of the Canadian Race Relations Foundation, said his organization defines racism as: "Any individual action, or institutional practice which treats people differently because of their colour or ethnicity. This distinction is often used to justify discrimination."

Asked if he sees Yan's research as "racist," Lo said he doesn't "see a problem" with academic researchers collecting statistics

on the nationalities of people who buy property in any country, whether they are Americans, Russians or Mainland Chinese.

"In Canada, we are so used to the idea of tolerance that we sometimes find it odd to look at nationalities. That causes some people to jump up and start using the word 'racism.' I don't think it's helpful," said Lo, whose organization has a \$25-million endowment.

"There are racists out there who will exploit this to advance their bigotries. But it's important to respectfully and honestly look at all the issues surrounding housing. There is no problem collecting statistical information on nationality, as long as you don't target one group. Some people throw out the word 'racism' to basically shut down debate."

Prof. Michael McDonald, former head of the University of B.C.'s centre for applied ethics, found no evidence of racism in Yan's "transparent" research, which acknowledges its limitations.

McDonald said Yan has been forced to find innovative ways to collect the data that the B.C. and federal governments have irresponsibly refused to provide on who is buying the city's most expensive real estate, which has a trickle-down effect that makes other dwellings unaffordable, especially for the young.

Yan's methodology, based on the high probability buyers with non-Anglicized Chinese first names are recent immigrants or foreign nationals, is common, McDonald said. Similar methods were used by University of Toronto professor Philip Oreopoulos in a major study on why immigrants are struggling in Canada's labour market.

"In terms of whether this is racism, we need to look at the context. My reading of this context is that it isn't racism. Frankly, if lots of expensive real estate was being bought by wealthy Scots in Scotland, that would raise the same issues as offshore Chinese."

Setty Pendakur — UBC planner emeritus, former Vancouver city councillor and senior adviser to Mainland China's State Council — also endorses Yan's work, countering suggestions of racism from the mayor and developers,



Albert Lo.

who are significant donors to Robertson's political party, Vision Vancouver, and to the B.C. Liberal Party.

"Andy's work is solid. The methodology is correct. It is acceptable by high academic standards. (Instead of) the mayor and others indulging in name-calling about 'racist tones,' it is better for civilized discourse if they can suggest how they would have done this research," said Pendakur.

"No one is willing to discuss this. A partial answer lies in (reforming) the tax system, which provides many of these investors ample opportunity to park illegal money and/or avoid Canadian taxes. Calling, or even hinting this research is racist, is inexcusable."

Vancouver immigration lawyer Samuel Hyman said Yan should be thanked by politicians, many of whom have for decades displayed "cowardice" by failing to document how trans-national migration and international money transfers shape housing prices.

Given that most countries closely monitor the nationalities of who is buying property, the claims of "racism" from the mouths of some Metro Vancouverites are unprecedented compared to elsewhere in the world.

Many countries go much further than simply tracking the citizenship of buyers. The U.S., Britain, most European countries, Australia, Hong Kong and

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MICHAEL McDONALD, ETHICIST

Mainland China impose a variety of restrictions on foreign ownership and housing speculation.

As Yan said, race-baiting is especially suspicious when it comes from developers and politicians. "My great-granddad paid the head tax," Yan has said. "So to somehow use (concerns about) 'racism' to protect your privilege? That's just absurd. This is an almost uniquely Vancouver reaction."

Yan's perspective is in line with that of B.C.'s former lieutenant-governor, the late David Lam, a real estate developer from Hong Kong, who had little patience for people who trotted out the racist accusation at the first hint of inter-cultural conflict. "When a Canadian is concerned about his own way of living," Lam said, "this concern is not racism."

Lo, who was in the real estate industry before heading the Canadian Race Relations Foundation, urges Ottawa and Victoria to openly investigate the complex factors behind community-destroying housing speculation in Metro Vancouver.

Lo believes the data on the nationalities of property purchasers in B.C. is already in the hands of government and not being released. He wonders what the big deal is.

After all, he said, even provinces like Saskatchewan already go further, restricting offshore buyers of farmland.

What exactly is racist, Lo asks, about simply tracking the passports of all those who buy B.C. property?

It's not exactly a new or radical concept.

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COMMENTARY

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