

Editorials

Please, Mr. Robinson, Don't Race on Me

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Sunday February 02, 2020 - 04:07:00 PM



Rigel Robinson on Twitter: "The defeat of #SB50 is a victory for segregationists and climate denial. Tenant advocacy groups did not kill the bill, the homeowner lobby did. The solutions to our housing crisis lie in robust tenant protections and dramatic densification — yes, BOTH."

And who might this Rigel Robinson be? He's the newish (2018) city council member from Berkeley's District 7, the beneficiary of the 2014 gerrymandering which followed the 2010 census, which was calculated to engineer a student-majority district. He's a recent post-student, 22 years old, but evidently his education so far hasn't included much about history.

The tweet quoted above is deeply offensive to those of us who have been laboring in the progressive vineyards for more than a few years.

Let's get something perfectly clear, Mr. Robinson:

Nobody races on me.

One more time, with feeling.

NOBODY RACES ON ME.

I was fighting segregation in Berkeley and Ann Arbor not just years, but decades and even generations before you were born, so don't you dare call me by that dirty name, the moral equivalent of the unmentionable epithets for people of African or Asian descent.

I take grievous offense at being called a segregationist by the likes of you. As do my peers. You owe us a major apology.

Thinking that SB50 would be bad law does not make us segregationists or climate deniers, and even being homeowners, if we are, does not make us demons.

Among other things, you should know that many groups representing low income people, people of color and yes, tenant advocates came out against SB50.

Google, if you must, the name of Damien Goodmon, just for one. Read his twitter posts. And take a look at this letter from some of the progressive groups which opposed

SB50: <http://allianceforcommunitytransit.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/SB-50-Oppose-Unless-Amended.pdf>

Didn't you see the magnificent series of direct actions by Oakland's Moms 4 Housing, including [the one where they shouted down Senator Scott Wiener and Berkeley's own Wienerite Nancy Skinner](#) on the steps of Oakland City Hall?

They weren't fooled by SB50, the bill authored by Wiener, [the single biggest recipient of real estate lobby campaign contributions in the California legislatures](#).

SB50 is not about segregation. It's all about capitalist gentrification, about handing over areas which are now home for elderly residents of previously red-lined communities of color to speculative developers of expensive apartments for well-off people who are predominantly young and of European or Asian descent.

This includes South and West Berkeley. When I first came to Berkeley as an undergraduate in 1959, those neighborhoods were dominated by African Americans, many of them homeowners, who had taken the place of Japanese Americans displaced by internment in World War II.

African and Asian Americans were not allowed to purchase houses east of Grove Street (now Martin Luther King), a form of segregation aided and abetted by local realtors. As a result, their family homes, both owned and rented, were predominantly in South and West Berkeley.

This situation persisted through the 1960s, but thanks to the efforts of both Black and White Berkeleyans, people like [Arlene Slaughter](#) and [William Byron Rumford](#), families of color who can afford the insane prices are now able to buy homes all over Berkeley.

But in the last decade the older generation of Black homeowners and renters in South and West Berkeley have been pushed out, in part by predatory lending and foreclosure in the subprime mortgage scandal. Their children and grandchildren will not benefit from fancy high-rent apartment construction in their old neighborhoods.

Evidently Councilmember Robinson wasn't paying attention when Councilmember Ben Bartlett, whose family has deep roots in South Berkeley, lamented eloquently during a Council housing discussion that none of the proposed units would really replace the homes of families of color that were taken by eminent domain and demolished to build BART around the Ashby station.

Yes, those were the despised single-family homes, the kind now demonized by the Wiener gang.

And even the promised small percentage of required inclusionary affordable apartments in proposed developments, if they ever materialize, won't replace the cheery bungalows with room for some collards and tomato plants in their, OMG, Back Yards which used to be home to Berkeley's African and Asian American families.

All "single family home" really means is a collection of bedrooms which share a kitchen, a common living room and a bathroom and have direct access to the out-of-doors. Houses like these have been the backbone of the Berkeley flats since the 19th century. Over the years, I've enjoyed sharing my "single family" homes with all kinds of people, both here and in the Midwest.

Historically Berkeley's "single family" homes been shared by eclectic groups of students as well as by nuclear and multi-generational families of blood relatives. One of my undergraduate homes was a classic Berkeley brown shingle at Channing and Telegraph in which all the other residents

were brainy girls from Taiwan studying physics and chemistry—I learned a lot about cooking and a few words of Mandarin from them.

In segregated Ann Arbor in the 1960s as a White couple we were able to rent a house in a White neighborhood which we could then share with Black housemates. We spent our first few years there getting a fair housing law passed.

Which brings us to Robinson's equally offensive slur on those who question SB50 and its progeny.

“Climate denial?”

That's nonsense.

Many of us recognize SB50 and its co-conspiratorial brethren as the neo-liberal supply-side sucker play that they are. This does not make us climate deniers—quite the contrary.

We grownups have been fighting to save the environment and protect the climate since before Mr. Robinson was out of disposable diapers (which we never used on our kids.)

In the 60s I also lived in a 19th century 3-bedroom Victorian cottage on Blake Street in Berkeley with a rotating cast of roommates and a huge fig tree out back. That one was demolished in the 60s to make way for a cheaply built 3-unit apartment which is now visibly disintegrating into a soft-story teardown.

There's plenty of credible research to prove that the greenest building is the one which already exists. This is especially true of the remaining solid pre-1960 structures built of old-growth redwood which are still standing when their ticky-tacky new neighbors are falling down. Tearing them down to build luxury condos for the profit of speculators carries an enormous cost in non-renewable climate-altering resources. Developers won't tell you that, however.

I am strongly tempted to go all Grandma on Berkeley Councilperson Rigel Robinson and demand that he has his mouth washed out with soap for calling those of us who dispute his facts by nasty names.

The dapper bow-tied clergyman who prayed before the impeachment hearings (I didn't get his name) somewhat wistfully quoted the scripture passage that “the truth will make us free.” If only.

In the age of Twitter, no truth need be invoked before stupid snap judgements like these can be instantly promulgated by any agitated politician, from the President of the United States right down to a local councilmember. But if an aspiring pol like Robinson wants to enjoy progressive support in his next race, wherever it might be, he might be wise to watch his language before he presses on into the future.