

Blong Yang represents communities of color

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Thursday, 06 February 2014 14:54

In his recent commentary, (*The Representation Gap*, *Insight News*, Jan. 28), Jordan Ash laments the lack of an African-American presence on the Minneapolis City Council. Former Ward 5 council member Don Samuels – who was the only African-American council member – took himself out of the running for the council seat and in his stead, the voters elected Hmong-American Blong Yang. Full disclosure, I worked on council member Blong Yang's campaign staff. I am now his senior policy aide, and am African-American.

I am paraphrasing Ash, but he essentially says, "increasing the power of one (racial) group relative to another may result in some communities being under-represented, therefore lessening the clout to win real changes that benefit communities of color and low-income neighborhoods." I see this as particularly problematic and, I would argue, shortsighted.

First, it is necessary to point out that a Hmong-American is a person of color. Do we really believe that an Asian man who's lived in the ward more than a decade is unable to represent Black people? There is no reason to believe that Yang can't fight for Ward 5's best interests or the interests of African-Americans. The problems we face affect us all. We need to increase the safety of our communities, attract living-wage jobs, bring equilibrium to the level of public services we receive (as in snow plowing, for example) and attract economic development to the ward to name a few. In terms of bolstering racial equity and equality for Northside people of color, Yang doesn't have to be black to understand racism, discrimination and the need for access to better opportunities. He's lived that reality just like the rest of us. Yang grew up in the public housing, subsisted on food stamps, and had parents who taught him to respect the value of education and hard work above all else to get ahead. Sound familiar?

There are grumblings in the Black establishment that Yang won because he turned out a huge contingent of Asian voters. Well, not exactly. There aren't enough eligible Asian voters in Ward 5 to elect Yang without voters from other demographic groups including, African-Americans. And, we talked to a good number of Black people who voted for Yang because they liked his energy and his message. It's one reason I signed onto his campaign. He's smart, dedicated to justice, equality and public service and he works hard. He was rewarded by winning the Ward 5 seat, which he won with a demographically diverse turnout. There was never a secret Asian plot at work. But that mixed group of voters is perhaps unwittingly signaling where we need to go.

Now and in the future, our struggles are less likely to be defined by race than by income inequality. As opportunities for living-wage work decline and educational achievement disparities persist, many people of color will be further relegated to the margins of society. In a city like Minneapolis, perhaps the smart money is on the formation of a coalition of progressives and people of all colors who work on implementing a broadly drawn agenda that serves us all. We can continue to bicker over who gets this one seat or we can expand our vision to encompass a wider alliance of motivated reformers to get us farther along the path of measurable and lasting change. Frederick Douglass said it best – "Power concedes nothing without a demand." We better stop worrying about the complexion and start planning for strategic progression.