

Normalizing Anti-Semitism in Student Governments

Purging Jewish Students From the Israeli/Palestinian Debate

by Richard L. Cravatts, PhD



In the campus war against Israel, the all too familiar refrain from student anti-Israel activists, many of whom form the loose coalition of groups and individuals spearheading the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign, is that their quarrel is only with Israel and its government's policies, not with Jews themselves. But that specious defense continues to fall away, revealing some caustic and base anti-Semitism, representing a seismic shift in the way that Jews are now being indicted not just for supporting Israel, but merely for being Jewish.

At McGill University this week, as the latest example, three board members of the University's Students' Society were

removed from their appointments after a vote at the Fall General Assembly due to what was reported to be their perceived "Jewish conflict of interest." The ouster was led by a pro-BDS student group, Democratize McGill, which was campaigning against pro-Israel students in the wake of a September ruling by the Judicial Board that, once and for all, rejected the BDS movement on the McGill campus, stating that it was violative of the SSMU's constitution because it "violate[d] the rights of [Israeli] students to represent themselves" and discriminated on the basis of national origin.

In retaliation, and to eliminate pro-Israel views on the board, Democratize McGill launched an effort to clear the board of BDS opponents, based on the cynical notion that these members harbored clear conflict of interests which arose from their purported biases, those conflicts of interests and biases stemming from the poisonous notion that because the students were Jewish or pro-Israel, or both, they could, therefore, never make informed or fair decisions as student leaders.

Ignoring their own obvious biases and the lack of any balance in their own views on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, the pro-BDS members nonetheless felt comfortable with suppressing pro-Israel voices and Jewish students on the board, asserting that they sought to remove these students because they "are all either fellows at the Canadian Jewish Political Affairs Committee (CJPAC), an organization whose explicit mandate is to promote pro-Israel discourse in Canadian politics, or primary organizers for the anti-BDS initiative at McGill." In other words, they were being disqualified for having views that differed from those student leaders seeking to purge them from SSMU. The Jewish board member and two other non-Jewish, pro-Israel board members were subsequently voted off the board.

McGill has a previous history of seeking to suppress pro-Israel thinking by Jewish students, not in the student

government but in its press. An example of that was the 2016 controversy involving *The McGill Daily* and its astonishing editorial admission that it was the paper's policy to not publish "pieces which promote a Zionist worldview, or any other ideology which we consider oppressive."

"While we recognize that, for some, Zionism represents an important freedom project," the editors wrote in a defense of their odious policy, "we also recognize that it functions as a settler-colonial ideology that perpetuates the displacement and the oppression of the Palestinian people."

Leading up to this revealing editorial, a McGill student, Molly Harris, had filed a complaint with the Students' Society of McGill University's (SSMU) equity committee. In that complaint, Harris contended that, based on the paper's obvious anti-Israel bias, and "a set of virulently anti-Semitic tweets from a *McGill Daily* writer," a "culture of anti-Semitism" defined the *Daily*—a belief seemingly confirmed by the fact that several of the paper's editors themselves are BDS supporters and none of the staffers were Jewish.

An attempted purging of a pro-Israel student from student government, very similar to the inquisition that just occurred at McGill, took place in February of 2015 at UCLA, when several councilmembers on the USAC Judicial Board, UCLA student government's highest judicial body, grilled Rachel Beyda, then a second-year economics student, when she sought a seat on the board.

The focus on her candidacy was not her qualifications for the position (which no one seemed to doubt), but specifically the fact that she was Jewish and how her "affiliation with Jewish organizations at UCLA . . . might affect her ability to rule fairly on cases in which the Jewish community has a vested interest in the outcome, such as cases related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," as the student newspaper described it.

“Ruling fairly” in this case, of course, meant that she was likely *not* to support the increasingly virulent anti-Israel campaign on the UCLA campus, so she failed to pass the political litmus test that so-called progressive students, enthralled with their pursuit of social justice, see as their default position—namely, being pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel.

It was the same thinking that inspired a similarly discriminatory proposal the previous May by two members of UCLA’s chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) which attempted to bar Jewish candidates from filling council positions if they had taken trips to Israel subsidized by the Anti-Defamation League, American Jewish Committee, or other organizations, which, according to the sententious activists, “have openly campaigned against divestment from corporations that profit from Israeli violations of Palestinian human rights.”

Of course, there was no mention in this debate of trips paid for to send pro-Palestinian students to Israel or the territories on propaganda excursions designed to malign Israel and teach visitors an alternate, anti-Israel narrative. Once again, in addition to trying to stack the deck against the pro-Israel argument, this grotesque and inequitable proposal took as a given that anyone not committed to the Palestinian cause was by default not to be trusted, incapable of making unbiased decisions, morally compromised, and unjustified in even harboring pro-Israel opinions.

Another odious attempt to rid a campus of Jewish and pro-Israel voices took place in 2015 when student council leaders at Durban University of Technology (DUT) in South Africa floated a proposal that suggested, apparently without the slightest shame or moral self-awareness, that Jewish students should actually be expelled from the institution, that, as the student body’s secretary, Mqondisi Duma, put it, “We took the decision that Jewish students, especially those who do not

support the Palestinian struggle, should deregister." This is, one would think, a rather shocking sentiment from students who themselves benefited from a world-wide campaign in the 1970s and 1980s to end South Africa's racist apartheid system.

The moral arrogance of the South African student's proposal was breathtaking, not only because of its grotesque version of the anti-Semitic practice of making any and all Jews responsible for the political actions of Israel; more serious than that, it revealed that the pro-Palestinian movement is so enthralled with the righteousness of its cause that anyone who harbors or expresses other views is considered a pariah, unworthy to even express his or her ideas in the marketplace of ideas on campus.

Progressive students have decided, in their own moral self-righteousness, that the Palestinian campaign for self-determination is such a sacred cause that anyone who questions it or speaks for the Israeli point of view is a moral retrograde. To even support Israel is to risk being deemed a racist, an imperialist, a tacit supporter of apartheid. And more than that: now, if you are Jewish and even a student in South Africa—nowhere near or involved in the affairs of Palestinian Arabs and Israelis—if you have not publicly proclaimed your allegiance to the Palestinian cause and denounced the Israeli one, you can be deemed morally unworthy of serving as a student leader or even attending a particular university.

The student leaders who, in the context of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, now try to suppress all thought of which they disapprove have sacrificed one of the core values for which the university exists. In their zeal to be inclusive, and to recognize the needs and aspirations of victim groups, they pretend to foster inquiry but have actually stifled and retarded it.

And as this otherwise noble purpose for the university has

devolved, the first victim in the dilution of academic free speech and debate, unfortunately, has been the truth.

Richard L. Cravatts, PhD, President Emeritus of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East, is the author of *Dispatches From the Campus War Against Israel and Jews*.