

Canadian Students Reject Liberal Party Leader Justin Trudeau's Attack on Palestine Activism, Free Speech

By [Ali Abunimah](#)

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Canadian Liberal Party leader Justin Trudeau digs for votes by attacking students who support Palestinian rights. (Adam Scotti/[Flickr](#))

A vote on divestment taking place today [March 15] at Montreal's McGill University has attracted national attention in Canada after Liberal Party leader and would-be prime minister Justin Trudeau attacked student organizers and questioned their right to free speech.

The BDS movement, like Israeli Apartheid Week, has no place on Canadian campuses. As a [@McGillU](#) alum, I'm disappointed. [#EnoughIsEnough](#)

— Justin Trudeau, MP ([@JustinTrudeau](#)) [March 13, 2015](#)

Trudeau added the hashtag “#EnoughIsEnough” in his tweet, signaling support for a [similarly headlined Montreal Gazette op-ed](#) which alleges that the divestment resolution would “marginalize Jewish students.”

Campaigners for the campus vote are hitting back in defense of their freedom of conscience and expression.

“Freedom of speech is a core Canadian value that has been enshrined in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and perhaps much to politicians' dismay, that does not only mean the protection of popular speech,” Solidarity for Palestinian Human Rights McGill (SPHR McGill) said in a [statement](#) emailed to The Electronic Intifada. “Once again, Israel is being singled out with unconditional support from government officials.”

“The only way that we will be able to remove the intentional suppression of discussion around Palestine that scares spineless politicians such as Trudeau and others is to refuse to be sidelined by their attempts to harass students at one of Canada's foremost universities,” the statement adds.

Rex Brynen, a professor of political science at McGill, also [responded](#) that he is “disappointed” that Trudeau “apparently opposes free speech rights of Canadian students.”

The Liberal Party has governed Canada for much of its history, but lost power to the Conservative Party in 2006. In 2011, the Liberals suffered their worst defeat in decades, collapsing to just 34 seats in Canada's 308-seat House of Commons.

The party has pinned its hopes on Trudeau to lead it back into government at national elections in October.

Trudeau's most significant achievement to date is being the son of Canada's legendary late prime minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

While no one accuses Trudeau of having his father's political acumen, charisma or wit, supporters hope that name recognition and nostalgia will carry the Liberals to victory.

SPHR McGill asks: "why would Justin Trudeau even bat an eye at campus politics? Because the work we are doing is impactful enough to scare privileged authoritarian centrists who cater to a demographic not fully representative of Canadian citizens."

Outside backing

The student organizers also charge that opponents of the divestment resolution have failed to win support on campus and have thus turned to the "voices of external mayors and government officials to interfere with campus politics."

On its [Facebook page](#), the "No" campaign - urging students to vote against divestment - boasts of support from Trudeau, the mayors of two Quebec towns, and from Montreal member of parliament Irwin Cotler.

The SPHR McGill [resolution](#) - similar to many others that have been put before student bodies in North America - calls on the university to "divest and refrain from investing in companies that pose social injury by contributing to the continuation and profitability of the illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories."

Backing BDS crackdown

With his intervention, Trudeau has effectively lent his support to the Conservative government of Prime Minister [Stephen Harper](#) which recently [signed agreements with Israel to repress the BDS movement](#).

In fairness, Trudeau is not the first Liberal Party leader to attack Palestine solidarity activism on campus for political opportunism and expediency.

In 2010, then Liberal Party leader Michael Ignatieff issued a statement calling on Canadians "to join with us in condemning Israeli Apartheid Week."

But as [critics noted](#), Ignatieff was engaging in the ultimate hypocrisy.

A few years earlier Ignatieff had [written in *The Guardian*](#) about a helicopter tour he had taken over Palestine.

"When I looked down at the West Bank, at the settlements like Crusader forts occupying the high ground, at the Israeli security cordon along the Jordan river closing off the Palestinian lands from Jordan," Ignatieff wrote, "I knew I was not looking down at a state or the

beginnings of one, but at a Bantustan, one of those pseudo-states created in the dying years of apartheid to keep the African population under control.”

SPHR McGill notes that “McGill took a stand and divested from South African apartheid in 1986 against the will of those in positions similar to that of Trudeau’s. This motion is no different.”

This post will be updated with the results of the vote, which is underway.

Voting underway for whether to vote by secret ballot, due to some students feeling uncomfortable voting openly pic.twitter.com/Ayxxt1rR6o — SPHR_McGill (@Sphr_McGill) [March 15, 2015](#)

Update The divestment motion was defeated by a vote of 276-212.

212 for, 276 against. Very close margin. This is an uphill battle, thank you to all who came out. Definitely more to come. — SPHR_McGill (@Sphr_McGill) [March 15, 2015](#)

Soooo proud of the [@Sphr_McGill #divestment](#) committee! The motion may not have passed this time around but you made a crucial impact [#ssmuGA](#) — Marina (@emmcupido) [March 15, 2015](#)

Full statement from SPHR McGill

We are unfortunately not surprised to see that leaders in our government have spoken out against the right of free speech that their “liberal” rhetoric advocates for. Freedom of speech is a core Canadian value that has been enshrined in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and perhaps much to politicians’ dismay, that does not only mean the protection of popular speech.

As a pro-Palestinian student group in Canada, it seems that our voices do not matter, even if we are advocating against injustices and violations of human rights that have already been condemned internationally.

Once again, Israel is being singled out with unconditional support from government officials. So why would Justin Trudeau even bat an eye at campus politics? Because the work we are doing is impactful enough to scare privileged authoritarian centrists who cater to a demographic not fully representative of Canadian citizens. And while we put in relentless effort to network with students and student groups by advocating inalienable human rights and speaking out against oppression and apartheid, the opposition has failed to win over students and has privileged the voices of external mayors and government officials to interfere with campus politics. This motion was drafted by a grassroots student organization with integrity and perseverance in dorm rooms and cafes, and will not be silenced by the opposition’s external endorsements and endowments. We will stand up for what is right. McGill took a stand and divested from South African apartheid in 1986 against the will of those in positions similar to that of Trudeau’s. This motion is no different.

The only way that we will be able to remove the intentional suppression of discussion around Palestine that scares spineless politicians such as Trudeau and others is to refuse to be sidelined by their attempts to harass students at one of Canada's foremost universities.

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Articles by: [Ali Abunimah](#)

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