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## **Trent Central Student Association rescinds its boycott of Israel**

Motion passed on heels of anti-Semitic controversy at Trent



Photo of Trent University

Peterborough This Week  
By Lance Anderson

**PETERBOROUGH --** On the heels of anti-Semitic controversy at Trent University, the Trent Central Student Association (TCSA) has decided to remove its boycott of Israel.

At a meeting last week, the students voted 47-28 to rescind a policy it passed in 2013. That policy outlined the stance the TCSA would take when dealing with items and issues related to Israel.

The TCSA sought to acknowledge Israel as an apartheid state and encourage others to reject investments, purchases and cultural exchanges with Israeli companies and groups. These included Israeli academic or cultural institutions.

Braden Freer, president of the TCSA, says the motion that was passed last week removes the boycott.

"We have no official stance on (Israel). Students are free to do (what they choose) without us having an opinion," says Mr. Freer.

Some of the issues surrounding the boycott of Israel were discussed during last week's Divestment Week events at Trent.

Controversy swelled when the logo organizers used to promote the event was hit with harsh criticism. Part of the logo showed the Israeli flag, with the Star of David, crossed out. The Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre for Holocaust Studies, a human rights group based in Toronto, called the logo anti-Semitic. That sparked organizers -- the Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG) and Sustainable Trent -- to pull the logo from its advertising and social media campaigns and make a public apology.

Mr. Freer says the controversy didn't have a direct influence on the motion that was passed last Thursday (Jan. 29).

"It's not directly linked," says Mr. Freer. "The two groups (that organized Divestment Week) are separate from the TCSA."

He adds the latest motion to rescind the original motion was discussed by a member of the TCSA last September and was just brought to last week's meeting for a vote.

Avi Benlolo, president and CEO of the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre for Holocaust Studies, says it was a welcome surprise to see students at Trent vote down the boycott, divestment and sanction motion. However, he still takes issue with the Divestment Week events and movement to boycott Israel.

[READ MR. BENLOLO'S LETTER HERE](#)

"What makes this outcome particularly amazing is the fact that it was non-Jewish students leading the charge," writes Mr. Benlolo, in a letter to This Week. "Clear thinking, and the recognition that boycotts serve only to shut down free speech and create an atmosphere of tension and division, has prevailed."

Trent president Dr. Leo Groarke also weighed in on the issue. In a letter, he outlined his views with regards to the controversy and issues surrounding divestment.

[READ DR. GROARKE'S LETTER HERE](#)

He says the divestment movement "is an attempt to have universities and other institutions withdraw their investments (typically endowment and pension funds) from Israeli companies, and from companies heavily involved in the production and/or use of fossil fuels."

Dr. Groarke says divestment from fossil fuel companies is currently before the Trent board of governors.

Despite the controversy, and at times heated debate during Divestment Week events, Dr. Groarke says most students took a respectful approach to the issue.

"As a university, we are committed to the free expression of different points of view and the debate that this produces. That debate is an essential element of the education we provide," writes Dr. Groarke in his letter. "We are at the same time committed to respectful debate which builds a community free of discrimination which is safe and secure for all."

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## **Jewish human rights group responds to anti-Semitic controversy at Trent**

On January 29 the Trent Central Student Association voted to rescind an antisemitic policy passed in February 2013 that seeks to defame, delegitimize and destroy the state of Israel.

The 'Boycott, Divestment and Sanction (BDS)' motion undermines the widely accepted concept of free speech and academic freedom on university campuses by advocating the academic and cultural boycott of the Jewish nation; one of the more lunatic policies of the BDS campaign is the demand that Israel free jailed jihadi terrorists, who have slaughtered and maimed thousands of Israeli citizens, as a condition for its repeal.

It is a movement that falsely labels Israel as an apartheid state in its efforts to further the student-led hate campaign against it. Truth plays no part in this aggressive crusade, which seeks to end the existence of Israel and replace it with a Palestinian state. The right of the Jewish people to live in the land from which they were repeatedly and forcibly exiled throughout history is not deemed worthy of student consideration.

Nor were the rights or sensitivities of the Jewish students at Trent considered by this ill-thought out, antisemitic propaganda machine, which appropriated the symbol of the Jewish people – the Star of David, and callously drew a slash through it in pro-divestment campaign literature. This effort succeeded only in offending both Jewish and non-Jewish students, and the wider Peterborough community, in the process. As Trent hosted Divestment Week during International Holocaust Remembrance Day, it is instructive to note that Hitler's first act against the Jews was a boycott. The hypocrisy in running a purported human rights campaign that is based on a fundamentally racist belief system is simply too strong to ignore.

Interestingly, there are no student-led divestment crusades against any other country in the world, no matter how abysmal the human rights record. China, Syria, Iran, Nigeria, Yemen, Libya and Venezuela – just to name a few, are given a pass by the BDS crowd. Countries like Saudi Arabia practice gender apartheid, yet are generally glorified by the west. The lashings, torture, beheadings and other horrific methods of murder employed by ISIS and other factions across the Middle East do not register on the BDS radar screen. The oppression of women, child marriages, female genital mutilation and slavery are not topics open for discussion. It is only Israel, desperately trying to survive amid a sea of countries openly calling for its destruction, which receives such imbalanced and slanderous focus.

I have found no evidence of statements, seminars, panels or programs by groups behind this BDS campaign which denounce the hatred of Jews. There are no press releases condemning the recent murder of Jews in a kosher grocery store in Paris, nor does Trent's latest Divestment Week include a panel on the need for the university to dissociate from countries or groups which call for the destruction of the Jewish people, as Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah continue to do. The reason why seems obvious – Jewish human rights do not seem to matter.

So it was a welcome surprise to see the students at Trent vote down the BDS policy. What makes this outcome particularly amazing is the fact that it was non Jewish students leading the charge. Clear thinking, and the recognition that boycotts serve only to shut down free speech and create an atmosphere of tension and division, has prevailed. Next, I look forward to a program by the Trent students association highlighting the evils of antisemitism, and speaking out against rising Jew hatred in Canada and around the world.

Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies will be happy to help.

-- Avi Benlolo, President and CEO of Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies

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## **Trent president responds to anti-Semitism complaints**

Learning from Divestment Week

Last week was an interesting one at Trent. Every week brings with it a flurry of activity and issues, but this one even more so given the controversies that arose over the “divestment week” activities organized by two student groups.

The divestment movement is an attempt to have universities and other institutions withdraw their investments (typically endowment and pension funds) from Israeli companies, and from companies heavily involved in the production and/or use of fossil fuels.

At Trent, divestment from fossil fuel companies is a matter which is before the Board of Governors. Last week it was the question of Israeli divestment that was a flashpoint for debate. The impetus for the debate was a student union resolution which sought to “acknowledge Israel as an apartheid state” and on this basis reject investments, purchases, and cultural exchanges with Israeli companies and groups.

The week began with a controversy over Divestment posters and online postings that featured a crossed out Israeli flag. Because the flag features the Star of David, a standard symbol of Judaism, the images were roundly criticized by some, who claimed that they were a racist attack on Jews and Judaism.

At the start of the week, when the student groups refused to remove their posters, the University received many complaints demanding that it intervene and do so.

In some cases, the tone of these complaints was a concern. One claimed (incorrectly) that one of the Trent supporters of Divestment posted a photo of someone with a Star of David tattoo wearing an ISIS balaclava. They complained of “anti-Jewish bigots” and the “misuse of hard working Canadian's tax dollars;” threatened to take action and concluded that “I cannot believe this is happening in my back yard. Unbelievable. You people have no shame.”

In dealing with the issues, the University struggled with competing values. As a university, we are committed to the free expression of different points of view and the debate that this produces. That debate is an essential element of the education we provide. We are at the same time committed to respectful debate which builds a community free of discrimination which is safe and secure for all.

We debated the question whether the controversial and online postings were discriminatory or could be classified as “hate speech.” Our lawyers thought not: because it was the Israeli flag (not solely the Star of David) which was crossed out, and because the laws curtailing freedom of speech are especially careful to allow political commentary.

Instead of looking for a way to force the issue, we decided to turn to dialogue and reached out to students on both sides of the debate. Our perspective was that defacing the flag of Israel did not promote useful debate, but fostered anger and purposely provoked divestment opponents by attacking their identity.

As a result of lengthy discussions, some with us, much on their own, student groups decided to remove the offending images they had used so that they would not be misinterpreted as anti-Semitic. This decision, and a statement from the University, defused some of the debate, but it did not disappear so much as morph into a debate about divestment.

Commentators from in and outside the University roundly criticized Trent for the Student Association's Divestment Policy. In the heat of this debate, some incidents occurred.

At one of the divestment week events, two visitors from outside the university were asked to leave after asking loud questions, swearing and saying they were there to disrupt proceedings. Both sides of the debate complained that their posters were “torn down” by their opponents. Campus Security resolutely refused to take sides, and were on call at all events where trouble might erupt. Student leaders were supported and the message of respectful disagreement was emphasized again, and again, and again.

During the week I saw two opposing approaches to conflict. One was demanding, impatient, polarizing, righteous and condemning. It heightened and incited conflict. The other was determined but respectful; vocal but careful of civility.

The latter approach reminds one of Gandhi. He did not hesitate to confront others when he saw injustice, but he did so with humility, in a way that never questioned the inherent goodness of those with whom he disagreed. In this way, Gandhian confrontation is an instance of satyagraha – the search for truth – which serves as a respectful invitation to dialogue and exchange.

At the end of the day, most of Trent's students took the Gandhian approach. Unlike some external commentators, they demonstrated that it is possible to have respectful, insightful, passionate exchanges between people who have radically opposing points of view. As an educator, I am proud of our students and think their behaviour bodes well for their future and all of ours.

-- Dr. Leo Groake