

Barbara Kay: At Ryerson, a rare win for Jewish groups on campus (and one with a pleasant twist)

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Darren Calabrese/ National Post

A building on Ryerson University's campus is seen in downtown Toronto Monday, June 18, 2012.

Last November, at Ryerson University, Students for Justice in Palestine and the Muslim Students Association led a walkout of Ryerson Student Union's (RSU) Semi-annual General Meeting in order to suspend quorum, when the group Students Supporting Israel (SSI) brought forward a motion endorsing Holocaust Education Week. Without quorum, the motion was unable to pass.

It was later discovered that the RSU executive was complicit in the walkout. The rationale offered by the obstructionists was their preference for a motion to endorse a week in which all genocides would be commemorated. But, as a member of SSI told me, an inference reinforced by other witnesses, "anti-Semitism was present in the room."

Although the original motion was passed at another meeting a month later, the widely-publicized debacle left a bitter aftertaste. If even the Holocaust, which has nothing to do with Zionism or Israeli politics, was considered too contentious a subject for automatic RSU approval, it seemed to confirm the belief among many Jewish students (and Jewish donors, some of whom expressed anger to the administration) that while the condemnation of "oppression" of other minorities on campus as they themselves define it was scrupulously supported, Jewish-specific victimhood was open to often-arbitrary interpretation.

SSI, with the moral support and human resources of Stand With Us, an international organization that fights anti-Israel bias on campus, was determined such unjust marginalization would not happen again. What was needed, they decided, was passage of a new motion entrenching a solid definition of anti-Semitism. New, because an older version of what constitutes anti-Semitism had already been submitted in November, 2014. It had passed, but in a radically amended form to exclude any reference to the state of Israel, and to the demonization of Israel as a form of anti-Semitism, an excision which was unacceptable to SSI.

The SSI have made good on their promise. On March 29 the RSU adopted a new and comprehensive definition of anti-Semitism, which will guard against any repetition of RSU's November humiliation.

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The new version mirrors the Ottawa Protocol on Combating Anti-Semitism, which is lengthy and detailed. It includes, for example, the stipulation that anti-Semitism is "demonizing/ stereotypical allegations about Jewish people," meaning in part conspiracy theories about world domination of the media or monetary networks by Jews, or "accusing Jews collectively of a wrong committed by a single Jewish person or group," and of course Holocaust denial. As for Israel, the Protocol states that anti-Semitism manifests itself in "denying Jewish people the right to self-determination, applying double standards of behaviour not demanded of any other country, and using anti-Semitic imagery to characterize Israel/ Israelis."

(Sidebar: Readers aware of my vigorous resistance to the recently passed parliamentary Motion 103 may find my approval of the Ottawa Protocols on Anti-Semitism hypocritical. To explain: The Ottawa Protocol, in which every word was weighed and assessed with a view to our right to freedom of speech, defines what our government agrees anti-Semitism is, and also what it is not. What it is is expressed hatred for Jewish people. It is not criticism of Judaism's tenets. Significantly, the Protocol states that "legitimate criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country is not regarded as anti-Semitic." Conversely, M-103, which devolves around the word "Islamophobia" was passed with no definition of Islamophobia attached. Furthermore, it was the concerted, deliberate strategy of all politicians involved to deflect or ignore any questions regarding its putative definition. Those resisting M-103 wanted reassurance that the government was not endorsing a chill on criticism of Islam and its tenets, or of Islamism. None, ominously, was offered.)

The new motion had the enthusiastic co-operation of RSU president, Obaid Ullah. Ullah was accused of complicity in the quorum-closure affair, and is a supporter of the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement, so it was a pleasant surprise when both SSI president Rebecca Katzman and vice-president Tamar Lyons informed me that Ullah has been a positive partner in entrenching the new definition of anti-Semitism. I then spoke with Ullah, who told me "anti-Semitism exists (on campus) and the Jewish community has not been supported and I think this is a first step (to rectify that)." Of the SSI activists, he said, "These are amazing people ... I want to thank (SSI) for taking the initiative to make this happen despite all the hardships we faced this year."

Good stuff, RSU. I hope other campus student unions will take note of, and aspire to model, the maturity of the relationship formed by these RSU students – opposed in convictions, but joined in pursuit of the larger goal of identity equity.

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