Controversial vote by McGill students supports BDS

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<u>More from Karen Seidman, Montreal Gazette</u> (HTTP://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/KJSEIDMAN)

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Almost 900 students turned out for the Students' Society of McGill University debate and vote on Monday afternoon, requiring at least four overflow rooms.   *DARIO AYALA / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

There were celebratory cheers and dancing as students at McGill University voted for the first time on Monday to support a highly controversial and divisive motion in favour of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

It was the third vote in 18 months for the Student Society of McGill University (SSMU) on the polarizing movement, which stems from a declaration issued in July 2005 — signed by about 100 Palestinian organizations — calling for boycotts, divestment and sanctions against Israel that mirror those levied against South Africa for apartheid in the 1980s.

While the motion has created much tension on campus, it carried with a strong margin of 512 to 357, surprising activists on both sides of the debate — although that represents a fraction of 30,000 or so students at McGill.

The victory for the McGill BDS Action Network stood in stark contrast to the message that

came out of the Canadian Parliament on the very same afternoon, as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberals overwhelmingly approved a Conservative motion to condemn Canadians who promote the BDS movement.

However, it's not known what impact or influence that motion, which passed by a vote of 229-51 (only one Liberal opposed), might carry. As well, the McGill vote still requires an online ratification by the entire student population that can change the results, said SSMU president Kareem Ibrahim, adding he really hoped "that Jews on campus won't feel alienated."

Even if the ratification passes, the McGill administration said that a vote at a SSMU general assembly does not oblige the university to consider any change in policy.

"Their discussions, motions, and votes do not directly affect university policy," said dean of students André Costopoulos in a brief statement. The motion mentions three companies that McGill holds investments in which it opposes: Mizrahi-Tefahot Bank, L-3 Communications and Re/Max.

 Laura Khoury, a member of the McGill BDS Action Network — which brought forward the motion for SSMU to adopt BDS campaigns as well as divest from companies "profiting from violations of Palestinian human rights" — said the contrast between Parliament and McGill students sends a powerful message.

"It says a lot about the government trying to silence students and it shows we don't agree with what they're doing," she said in an interview.

And no matter what McGill's position, the vote is "symbolically extremely important," said Lucas Snaije, another member of the Action Network.

It was a bitter defeat for the "No" side, said organizer Aliza Saskin. While surprised at the margin but not the result, she said there is anger about SSMU "not representing all students on campus, even when their own bylaws call for no discrimination against anyone based on their cultural origins."

BDS consistently sparks heated rhetoric from both sides of the debate and raises tensions on campus, with students supporting it saying they won't back down from fighting for social justice for Palestinians while Jewish students call it masked anti-Semitism that merely serves to undermine the legitimacy of the state of Israel.

Almost 900 students turned out for the debate and vote on Monday afternoon, requiring at least four overflow rooms from the main SSMU ballroom. Many were sporting a Palestinian kaffiyeh, the black and white scarf that has become a symbol of Palestinian nationalism.

Given one minute to speak, students lined up for a chance to express why they were for or against BDS, and finally voted to hold a secret ballot on the motion.

A student who helped draft the motion implored others not to turn it into a debate about racism. "Nobody involved in this is racist or anti-Semitic," she said.

Some students who spoke to the Montreal Gazette before the vote said they were still undecided and had come to hear the arguments. Others already had firmly entrenched positions.

Jordanian engineering student Karim Khoury said he was hoping that, by supporting the motion, the Sabra hummus that he sees on campus might stop being sold. (Sabra is owned jointly by Strauss Group, an Israeli food company, and PepsiCo, and has been targeted by BDS supporters on many campuses.)

Despite the tension the vote has caused on campus, cognitive science student Munema Moiz

said it was "an important social justice issue with practical implications, not just symbolic."

But political science student Rayna Lew said the debate brings out the worst in people. "The climate it creates on campus is quite unhealthy," she said. "This is not a black and white issue; it's very complex."

"It is our moral obligation to fight for this cause," said Laura, who is Palestinian. "We are standing in solidarity with people who are oppressed daily and humiliated."

But Saskin argued that "BDS collectively punishes Jewish students and is inherently anti-Semitic."

She said students on the opposing #enoughisenough campaign were drained from the persistent motions supporting BDS. And the results were even more upsetting because of the position taken in the House of Commons.

"The government is acknowledging how detrimental this debate is to campus life," she said.

The ratification vote will take place within the week, according to Ibrahim.

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