

This report was prepared specifically for the CPCCA inquiry.

OPIRG-Ottawa: Legitimizing Hate and Discrimination on Campus

My name is Miriam Stein and I am a Common Law student at the University of Ottawa. I volunteer for Hillel Ottawa and am the Advocacy Chair for the Jewish Law Students Association (JLSA) for the 2009-2010 academic year. While the following report discusses events that involve either Hillel Ottawa or the JLSA, this report is an individualized account and does not necessarily represent the beliefs or opinions of either Hillel Ottawa or the JLSA.

OPIRG-Ottawa is categorized by the Student Federation of the University of Ottawa (SFUO) as an “Other Levied Organization.” It shares this privileged status along with three official University of Ottawa entities: Legal Aid, Student Academic and Support Services and Sports Services. In 2007-2008, the SFUO allocated over \$200,000 in student levies to OPIRG-Ottawa.

OPIRG-Ottawa claims to be a non-partisan group, unaffiliated to any political party or movement. The organization claims to be dedicated to bringing together and building upon a broad-based community.

With a mandate to advocate for social, environmental and economic justice, the Ontario Public Interest Group’s Ottawa contingent (OPIRG-Ottawa) seemed like it would be a natural supporter of an event held in November 2008 by the Jewish student group Hillel Ottawa (along with the broader Ottawa Jewish community). A Ugandan Jewish leader was to discuss topics such as sustainable development initiatives and education among Christians, Muslims and Jews in Uganda – topics in line with OPIRG-Ottawa’s interests.

Thus, it came as a shock when OPIRG-Ottawa refused to support the aforementioned event simply because it was in part organized by Hillel. While I was aware of OPIRG-Ottawa’s anti-Israel stance before inviting the organization to sponsor the event, the event was non-political and unrelated to Israel. Plus, Hillel was not requesting money; just formal support in sponsoring the event and, if possible, helping Hillel promote the event to the student community.

After the event had passed, OPIRG-Ottawa decided that it should respond to my invitation. I was sent an email directed to Hillel. The email stated that OPIRG-Ottawa could not sponsor what seemed to be an “interesting” event due to Hillel’s “[r]elationship to apartheid-Israel and Zionist Ideology.” Since then, OPIRG-Ottawa has more than twice re-affirmed its blanket rejection against working with Hillel. Meanwhile, OPIRG-Ottawa remains open to working with many other student groups and lists “Solidarity For Palestinian Human Rights” as one of its action groups, thus ensuring that this group has access to OPIRG-Ottawa’s resources.

As student outrage against OPIRG-Ottawa’s stance against Hillel intensified, on December 16, 2008, OPIRG-Ottawa posted a public response addressing students’ concerns. In the letter, OPIRG-Ottawa stated:

In Hillel Ottawa's mandate, it specifies that Hillel “... promotes the support of the Jewish State: The State of Israel.” OPIRG-Ottawa views Hillel’s steadfast support of Israel to be a position that alienates Palestinians and undermines respect for their personhood,

mobility rights and basic human rights. Accordingly, OPIRG-Ottawa cannot formally endorse Hillel Ottawa or events sponsored by it. OPIRG-Ottawa bases its decision on Hillel's political support of Zionism, while it is open to working with Jewish organizations and other organizations that respect basic human rights for Palestinians.

I was, and still am, appalled by OPIRG-Ottawa's zero-sum formulation of support for the State of Israel and Palestinians' human rights. This zero-sum reasoning is offensive, simplistic, and blatantly false. Moreover, I am appalled by OPIRG-Ottawa's ignorant and naive understanding of Zionism, as well as its use of the word in a derogatory manner.

As a member of the Jewish Law Students Association (JLSA), I teamed up with the JLSA's then Advocacy Chair to respond to OPIRG-Ottawa's letter. We explained that OPIRG-Ottawa's stance against Hillel makes Jewish students feel isolated and marginalized. To address OPIRG-Ottawa's refusal to work with known Zionists while remaining open to working with other Jewish organizations, we noted that for many Jews, to be Jewish is to be Zionist. We asserted that "as a Jew, I have the right to believe in my peoples' inalienable right to self-determination." OPIRG-Ottawa continued to remain steadfast in its position against Hillel Ottawa. It is clear that if any Jewish organization does wish to work OPIRG-Ottawa, it must share OPIRG-Ottawa's extreme political and social views regarding Israel or support Israel in silence.

As a result of OPIRG-Ottawa's stance toward Hillel Ottawa, I helped initiate an opt-out campaign on campus so that students can recover the portion of their tuition fees that helps fund OPIRG-Ottawa. Unlike other universities that provide an online opt-out, Ottawa students must undergo the hassle of providing OPIRG-Ottawa with their valid student card, as well as proof of registration and payment for the semester *in person* to opt-out. Several students later reported to me feeling uncomfortable being forced to opt-out in person. One student stated that after writing down her reasons for opting-out, an OPIRG-Ottawa worker read her reasoning while she was present in OPIRG's office, and seemingly snickered at the written explanation.

I raised my concerns regarding OPIRG-Ottawa to: i) the University's President, Mr. Allan Rock; ii) The President of the University's Student Federation, Mr. Dean Haldenby; and iii) the Director of the University's Centre for Equity and Human Rights, Ms. Francine Page. While Mr. Rock blogged about his concerns, Ms. Page has provided me with information explaining how OPIRG-Ottawa can be eliminated (a burdensome task which ultimately relies on the goodwill of the student body to vote against OPIRG-Ottawa). Ms. Page has yet to furnish me with information regarding the possibility of an online opt-out.

The result is that OPIRG-Ottawa has been able to marginalize and discriminate against Jewish students without any consequence. Most recently, in its online newsletter, OPIRG-Ottawa discussed the Pride Parade in the context of social justice. The organization stated that "... we are fed up with Israel's attempts to *falsely brand* itself as a safe haven for queers in order to *divert* the world's attention from its *racist* policies towards Palestinian people. We believe all forms of oppression are related. We do not support the fight against homophobia if it is perpetuating racism" (emphasis added).

OPIRG-Ottawa's statements regarding gay rights in Israel suggests that Israel is in fact not a democratic state that is accepting of its gay community. Moreover, OPIRG-Ottawa suggests that Israel's apparent acceptance of the gay community is a deception to divert the world's attention from Israel's "oppressive" and "racist" regime.

It is evident that OPIRG-Ottawa is dedicated to condemning the Jewish State and attributing false and offensive qualities to Israel, and by extension, to those who support Israel.

OPIRG-Ottawa's behaviour isolates Jewish students at the University of Ottawa. As a Jewish student, I feel marginalized and unrepresented by this organization. I feel victimized as a Jew, and that my voice has been silenced because I am denied equal participation and representation by OPIRG-Ottawa on campus. I feel further victimized by the horrific qualities that OPIRG-Ottawa attributes to the Jewish State. Rather than encouraging dialogue and allowing for thoughtful criticism of Israel (as there should be for any state), OPIRG-Ottawa has rejected all dialogue and has come to a conclusion regarding Israel. Yet, OPIRG-Ottawa is silent and/or open to discussion regarding other countries and is willing to work with other student groups that support their respective homelands. How could I not feel discriminated against as a Jew?