The Fossil Fuels Divestment Movement at Concordia: History and Insights

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The Divestment Movement at Concordia

Introduction:

In early 2013, a number of Concordia students, most of whom had met at an environmental conference called Powershift, formed the group Divest Concordia to begin a campaign to transition the university's investments out of fossil fuels industries and towards more sustainable forms of investment. Their efforts were a part of a global movement that had emerged earlier in 2011/12 from universities across the US, with fossil fuel divestment centered as a way for institutions to take a tangible stance on the climate crisis.

There is a wealth of scholarship that covers the divestment movement as a whole; from its humble beginnings across a handful of university campuses, to its status as the fastest-growing divestment campaign in history, with endorsements from the UN and just under 8 trillion dollars divested to date [1]. The purpose of this paper is more humble in scope, as I intend to focus on the divestment campaign as it has unfolded at Concordia University.

As a note on methodology, I will draw from my direct experiences on the matter (I have been involved in the campaign since its inception), and will reference news/media pieces whenever possible. This approach can broadly be categorized as a kind of ethnography, as it is a qualitative investigation, developed without the grounding of a scientific theory or hypothesis, aimed at creating a deeper understanding of the contextual progress of divestment campaigns.

When discussing the campaign at Concordia, consistent attention will be given to the state of the Concordia Student Union (CSU), which goes through annual elections every March/April, in which all 8 of its executive members, as well as all 25 of its councilors (board members) are up for elections. The reason for this is twofold: Firstly that the union is the highest representative body for undergraduates at Concordia (who total over 36,000[2]) with connections at every level of the university to act as an effective lobbying body, and secondly because the CSU has by far the largest resources (human and capital) which the divestment campaign has relied on since inception.

2013 - Foundings

Divest Concordia was founded in early 2013, in collaboration with the CSU and Arts and Science Federation of Associations (ASFA). Research funding was granted from the CSU to investigate the university's investments at the time, which was contracted to professor Erik Chevrier. Funding was also granted to rebrand. The initial communications with the university went amiably, and a loose, and unofficial, committee was stuck, dubbed the Socially Responsible Investment working group. The committee included faculty, undergraduate, graduate, and administration representatives. Discussions began in September of 2013 and continued for many months following.

The rest of Divest Concordia, in the meantime, began recruiting membership through popular education workshops, 101's, and other forms of community engagement. The membership of the group swelled to a dozen active members, who met biweekly to discuss updates, outreach, and strategies. Much of the communication was conducted through the website and Facebook pages [3].

The research produced by professor Erik Chevrier showed that Concordia had recently been adopting significant shifts in its investments, both to transfer "the majority of their investments from common stocks to pooled funds" [4] as well as adopting a new system of labels for the way it reported its holdings, phasing out the labels of "oil & gas", "pipelines", and "metals & minerals", which supposedly fit into the new category of "energy", totalling approximately $11 million. Divest Concordia campaigned under the well-founded assumption that this meant Concordia's investments in fossil fuels totalled approximately $11 million, an assumption that was later confirmed by the administration in subsequent public comments as "around 5-10%" [5].

2014 - The movement grows

2014 was one of the most successful years for the divestment campaign at Concordia, and the roots of this success can be traced to the CSU elections of that year. As previously mentioned, the CSU had been supportive of the campaign, but the organization was fragmented by conflicting internal politics that prevented it from embracing and advancing the campaign as a whole. This changed following the CSU elections of 2014, in which the executive team *Community Matters* came into power in the union [6]. The team was strongly supportive of fossil fuels divestment, with a founding member of the campaign within their ranks. Similarly, the CSU council included a majority of support towards fossil fuels divestment. With the full support of the union secured, the divestment campaign was in full swing.

Mobilization

2014 was also a significant year for the climate movement as a whole, and Divest Concordia took full advantage of its newfound influence with the union. Two significant events were held within weeks of the fall semester at Concordia. The first was to bring in Bill McKibben, a founder of the environmental group 350.org that had launched the global divestment movement, as a speaker to Concordia. The event was opened by Ellen Gabriel, a prominent Canadian indigenous and environmental rights advocate who was the former spokesperson for the Mohawk people during the Oka Crisis. Between McKibben and Gabriel, Concordia students were given an insightful narrative of the climate crisis, which was later channeled towards the administration in a meeting with McKibben in which he lent his weight as an internationally-acclaimed scientist behind Divest Concordia, with positive reception.

The second event centered around the launch of Naomi Klein's latest book, *This Changes Everything*, a scathing critique of capitalism and the floundering of institutional leadership during the climate crisis, coinciding with the much-anticipated *People's Climate March,* a day of mass-mobilization for climate justice worldwide. Divest Concordia, Divest McGill, the CSU, and the Student Society of McGill University (SSMU, McGill's union), co-hosted the Montreal launch of Klein's book, and organized a pair of busses to bring student activists to New York to participate in the largest gathering of the *People's Climate March,* in which over 300,000 people took the streets to demand action on climate change [7].

As an attempt to grow the reach of the environmental movement within Quebec, members of Divest Concordia began organizing provincially by founding a new organization called Étudiantes Contre les Oléoducs (ECO), a cross-university association with the mandate of protesting all pipeline expansion projects from Canada's tar sands. A protest was organized in November of 2014, in which hundreds of students took to the streets demanding the shut down of the Keystone XL, Energy East, Northern Gateway, and TransMountain pipelines, among others [8].

During the same period, the CSU began to divest its own holdings of fossil fuels by setting up a socially responsible investment (SRI) portfolio with the firm Lester Asset Management. The CSU at the time had holdings of over $12 million, and while much of this funding would be allocated towards solidarity economy projects in the months and years following, the vast majority of it remained stagnant in simple bank accounts. The union needed to show leadership on sustainable investment to persuade the university to do the same.

Solidarity Campaigns

While all of this was unfolding, the CSU was going through its usual byelections period, in which students could run for vacant seats in the executive and council, and referendum questions could be voted on. These elections were suddenly under the national spotlight, as a referendum question had been submitted asking students whether or not they wished to mandate the CSU to support the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) movement, an international solidarity effort with the Palestinian people, demanding through institutional action that the state of Israel adhere to international law. Due to the incredibly controversial nature of the Israel-Palestine question, BDS was (and still remains) a highly polarizing topic, receiving condemnations from hugely influential figureheads including current Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau [9].

As the members of Divest Concordia were slowly learning, Concordia is an institution that is highly sensitive to its public image. Concordia had a history of Palestinian activism, most notably in 2003 with the “Netanyahu riots” that brought (negative) international attention, and the current administration was not at all interested in being associated with the topic again [10]. The response from the university was a swift condemnation from the President, Alan Shepherd, along with meetings (and photo ops) with the local Israeli consulate [11], all of this in an attempt to sway the coverage of the BDS campaign that was taking place under the CSU, which gathered intensive coverage from the media [12].

It was within this context that the Socially Responsible Investment working group met and decided to begin to divest from fossil fuels. The cumulative efforts of over a year of lobbying and successful mobilization from the student body, as well as the pressures of the BDS campaign's media attention, created a rare opportunity that was leveraged to make Concordia the first university to begin the divestment process with a $5 million SRI (socially responsible investment) portfolio that would negatively screen for fossil fuel investments as well as other unsustainable industries [13]. The BDS question also passed, generating years of follow-up articles to smear the decision of the union's membership by conflating the BDS campaign (in a typical fashion) with anti-semitism. [14].

The members of Divest Concordia were flushed with this new victory, but saw it as falling far short of the actions needed to truly combat the climate crisis. In this spirit, one of the members of the group, who also sat on the SRI working group with the university, wrote an opinions piece in the Link (Concordia's student newspaper) condemning the university for not going far enough. This enraged the university administrators, and led to the working group being permanently dissolved [15].

2015 - Transitions in Divest Concordia

2015 was a slower period for the divestment movement. As with many activist groups, the members of Divest Concordia were engaged in multiple grassroots campaigns and efforts, and sometimes the more pressing context of one campaign would overwhelm the commitments to another. Such was the case in much of 2015, with anti-austerity strikes taking hold throughout much of Montreal [16], protesting the cuts to public funding suffered under the newly-elected provincial Liberal government. This also coincided with the development of large, multi-million dollar solidarity economy projects from the CSU, including the launch of the Hive Cafe Solidarity Cooperative [17], and the beginnings of the Reggie's bar Solidarity Cooperative [18], Woodnote Housing Cooperative [19], and CSU Daycare center [20].

The CSU elections of that year saw the team *Community Action* come to power, which was largely an extension of the previous year's team, and included a similar composition of elected councillors. This ensured that the CSU's support of the divestment campaign was unwavering, despite the overlapping commitments.

Collaborations

During this time, Sustainable Concordia, a well-established environmental advocacy group at Concordia operating through an independent union fee-levy, fully endorsed the divestment campaign, and began actively organizing. This greatly increased the capacity of the members to build the campaign, and added some much-needed structure to the grassroots group. Sustainable Concordia continues to be an active organizer of the campaign.

Divest Concordia had collaborated since its beginnings with Divest McGill, its sister campaign in the only other English-speaking university in Montreal. These activities included crashing political events (such as then-head of the Liberal party and hopeful for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's speaking tour), art builds, crashing oil-lobby funded speaking events (Enbridge presents: The Walrus Talks), and participating in small-scale occupations and protests against each other's administrations. During 2015, Divest McGill facilitated an impressive mobilization of hundreds of students, which they channelled into targeting the McGill administration building with an outdoor tent occupation reminiscent of the Occupy movement's tactics that continued for many months. This garnered national media attention [21]. Divest McGill's mobilization and outreach continue to inspire divestment campaigns across the country.

2016 - Divest Concordia grows

2016 was another strong year for the divestment movement, beginning in February with the establishment of the JSIAC, or Joint Sustainable Investment Advisory Committee, which was set up by the university after pressure from the student body (primarily through ASFA and the CSU) as the spiritual successor to the previous SRI working group [22]. The composition was to remain similar to its previous iteration, but this was now an official university committee mandated to discuss the divestment process, and included an explicitly designated seat for Divest Concordia. The meetings were set to be held once per semester. The committee continues to meet to this day.

The CSU elections of 2016 saw the executive team *Act Together* take power, a team that was strongly in favour of the divestment campaign and included a number of dedicated activists. The CSU expanded its campaigns department to include part time staff and a researcher, and made the fossil fuels divestment campaign its annual campaign.

In March of 2016, Divest Concordia partnered with the CSU, Dean of Students Office, Faculty of Arts & Science, and Sustainability Action Fund (SAF) to fund the projection of Damon Matthew's climate clock, in collaboration with musician and artist David Usher. The collaboration brought huge media attention to the university and to the urgency of the climate crisis [23]. Divest Concordia, Divest McGill, and Sustainable Concordia collaborated on a community street festival with workshops and music below the projection.

In November of 2016, the CSU put two referendum questions to ballot asking Concordia students for a mandate on divestment. Divest Concordia ballooned in numbers and a campaign was launched to secure the "yes" vote for the questions. Both referenda passed, with the main question taking over 80% of the vote. With the new mandate from the student body, the CSU put an additional $3 million into a new SRI portfolio, in this case handled by the firm Jaralowsky

Fraser. This brought the CSU's total portfolio of $10 million to full divestment, with $8 million in two SRI portfolios and $2 million set as liquefiable in bank accounts.

The CSU noted that the funds were making higher-than average market returns within the SRI funds, something that was reiterated by the university for their own $5 million SRI portfolio [24]. This was in line with the general literature on sustainable investing, and creates an interesting avenue for argumentation within divestment campaigns globally.

2017 - present - The campaign today

2017 marked the beginning of a low point in Divest Concordia's mobilization. This came about mostly due to an over-dependence on the CSU campaign's team, which had taken over the core facilitation of the campaign, and the CSU elections producing a mixed team, with half of the executive being with the divestment-friendly team *Connect* and the other half being with the team *Embrace Concordia*. Following the elections, the difficulties of a mixed team coupled with the re-prioritization of the CSU campaigns department to new work had a negative impact on the divestment campaign as a whole.

Noteable events since 2017

In March of 2017, the CSU again partnered with multiple internal and external organizations to project Damon Matthew's climate clock, this time with a panel discussion including musician and artist David Usher, the Tyndall Centre for Climate Research's Corinne Le Quéré, Aamjiwnaang & Sarnia Against Pipeline (ASAP)'s Vanessa Grey, and 350 Canada's Clayton Thomas-Muller.

In 2018, Concordia signed on to the UN's PRI (Principles of Responsible Investing), a framework developed to help investors incorporate Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) factors into their decision making. The move is mostly symbolic in nature, as no substantive changes to Concordia's investments are announced [25]. Since that time, fossil fuels divestment ceases to become an issue that garners attention within the CSU elections, with most executive and council campaigns focusing on other issues.

Conclusion: Divestment at Concordia

The divestment campaign at Concordia has come a long way. From its humble beginnings of a few students with a passion for sustainability, it morphed into having the first successes of any divestment campaign in Canada, and moved a total of $13 million in investments away from the fossil fuels industry from the university and student union. The successes in terms of outreach, awareness, and collaborations are more difficult to quantify, but it is safe to say that the impacts of the campaign were felt wide and far, even attracting criticism from former Premier of Quebec Jean Charest [26]. The movement has been a force at Concordia in educating students on the urgency of the climate crisis, and the powerful tools at our disposal in combating it.

Nevertheless, the central issue of full divestment from fossil fuels by the university still remains unfulfilled, despite the huge and growing power of the fossil fuels divestment movement globally, and recent announcements of intentions to divest from institutions as local as the city of Montreal [27]. The challenge for future generations of divestment organizers will be to leverage their past successes to build up a case for true divestment by strengthening and utilizing the resources of the union, and to then channel that mobilization into a wider movement for socio-environmental justice. With the backing of former organizers, the engagement and solidarity of faculty members, and the support of the Concordia community, these challenges become an opportunity.

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