

## **“Why I Resigned from My Professorship at McGill University”**

Gregory Mikkelson, 08.02.20

It is a question of respect.

First of all, respect for the kinds of knowledge that scholars in universities create. Scholars in natural science let the world know in 2009 that we can burn only a [small fraction](#) of the underground reserves already discovered by fossil fuel companies and have a livable planet. Scholars in the humanities let the world know in 2010 that those fossil fuel companies have used the [same techniques as tobacco companies](#) did – and even employed the same people – to mislead citizens about the harms they cause, and thwart government action in the public interest. On the other hand, scholars in social science let the world know in 2013 how [successful past divestment campaigns](#) have been in creating political pressure resulting in such necessary government action.

Second, respect for the will of the people who work and study at universities. Divestment from fossil fuel has won strong support from students, faculty, and staff. In early February of 2020, the [Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences voted](#) 179 to 20 in favor of divesting the largest university endowment in the world. The previous summer, the [University of California's Academic Senate also voted](#) strongly in favor of divestment. Two months later, their [Board of Regents agreed](#) to do it. California's 10-campus system is now selling off all fossil fuel stock from not only their \$18 billion endowment, but also their \$93 billion pension fund.

Unfortunately, the central administration and Board of Governors at McGill have little respect for either science or democracy.

When the Board refused Divest McGill's request in 2016, they wrote as if that student group had made up all the arguments for divestment themselves, rather than acknowledging their solid grounding in peer-reviewed research. Meanwhile, the [Board's own 15-page "report"](#) would have failed as an undergraduate paper. After I submitted a divestment motion to our Senate in 2018, the [Principal and Provost tried to prevent it from even being considered](#). They complained repeatedly that the Senate had no business discussing such a supposedly non-academic topic – despite the fact that [our own statute](#) empowers the Senate to

advise the Board on "any claims and needs of the University or any part thereof". Despite their opposition, the divestment motion won by a crushing majority.

In response, our Board violated yet another one of the statutes they are legally bound to honor. This one calls for creation of a joint Senate-Board committee to resolve any disagreement arising between the two bodies. Instead, the Board referred the matter back to their [own committee](#), chaired this time by a former Petro-Canada executive. This committee first delayed for an inordinately long time. Then, 15 months after the Senate resolution, they [substituted what they call "de-carbonization"](#) for divestment. While divestment aims to keep most fossil fuel in the ground, so-called "de-carbonization" only holds fossil fuel companies responsible for [how efficiently they extract their product from the ground](#). Compare this insultingly late and weak response with the University of California Board's two-month turnaround to full divestment after their Senate resolution, as mentioned above.

The McGill divestment campaign has had just about every democratic success imaginable. Every student, staff, and faculty organization considering the matter has endorsed it - not to mention the Senate, the largest and most representative body on campus. When our Board defied even this, I could no longer in good conscience work for an organization "governed" in such an anti-ecological, anti-humanitarian, anti-democratic, and anti-scientific way.