

## OTTAWA LEAP DEBATE – AVI LEWIS REMARKS

"Resolved that the Leap Manifesto advances the fight against climate change."

Thank you Inger, thank you Verna for welcoming us once again to your territory, and starting this conversation off in a good way by opening our hearts. Thanks also to the University of Ottawa and Group of 78 for organizing this event – and thank you Nadia for your superb elocution and Verna for your beautiful reading of the Leap Manifesto.

Let me leap right in – there is, of course, no time to waste.

We are trapped - and by we, I mean settler society here on Turtle Island. We are suffering from a massive disconnect when it comes to our discourse around the climate crisis.

The disasters are barreling down upon us with increasing speed and intensity. Scientists are connecting specific weather events to climate change. Everything they warned us about is happening faster than predicted – and those scientists are now scrambling to revise their timelines.

And yet our global political class is still offering plans that are utterly insufficient. The Paris agreement is indeed an historic deal – and yet the country commitments within it will likely add up to more than 3 degrees of warming. If those commitments are even met.

Here in Canada, one year into a new administration that has put climate at the top of its agenda, we still have no plan. And when it comes, in the next few months, it is almost certain to aim only at the emissions reduction targets set by Stephen Harper a decade ago. Those targets fall disastrously short of what would be required to meet our historical responsibility for the carbon in the atmosphere, and our capacity to pay as a rich and privileged country.

But even so, we are told by our Environment minister, those targets are seen in the halls of power here as extremely tough to achieve.

And into this disconnect – this urgency gap – this inexplicable mismatch between what we know is happening and what we’re doing about it – into this moment comes the Leap Manifesto. And now, we’re here tonight talking about much more profound policy changes than any on offer from our politicians.

So **the first way** in which the Leap Manifesto advances the fight against climate change is that the scale of the proposal matches the scale of the crisis.

For many of us, this comes as a cosmic relief: at last, a set of demands that actually acknowledges how much and how fast we need to change.

For this reason, the Leap Manifesto utterly rejects the incrementalism – the supposedly pragmatic but disastrously failing approach currently on offer. Instead, it calls for change that is transformative.

This is **the second way** in which the manifesto advances the fight.

Had we – as a global society - started cutting emissions in the early 1990s, when the science was clear and plausible deniability was no longer an option, perhaps we could have attacked this problem with little steps and gradual measures. But we didn’t. And now, as Naomi Klein likes to say, there are no non-radical options left.

Either we embrace radical change now to reduce emissions, or the changes we have wrought in our physical world will force radical change upon us – and that will be change of a much more violent kind.

And so the Manifesto calls for transformation, not tweaks – for change that is systemic, not symbolic.

**Third**, the LEAP MANIFESTO rejects market mechanisms in favour of bold government and community action. This is an important advance because our elites and technocrats are still enamoured of harnessing the magic of the market to solve wicked problems like climate change – cap and trade, emissions trading credits, a nominal price on carbon, and the like.

But we have had some of these measures in place for years now – there is a track record, and it is one of embarrassing, abject failure.

One example: BC's carbon tax. This is a critical case – I remind you that the Trudeau government has set as its most concrete climate goal to have a price on carbon in every province.

BC was an early adopter of the carbon tax. That tax has been frozen at 30 dollars a tonne since 2012. Far from slowing emissions, they have actually been rising in BC since 2011. And if Christy Clark realizes even part of her fantasy economic miracle of an export industry for fracked gas, those emissions will continue to increase for decades.

So BC's carbon tax was set too low and failed to increase, and therefore has not slowed emissions. But it has also done nothing to fund climate solutions, because it was conceived as revenue neutral – another fetish object of neoliberals that we desperately need to shed. Actually, BC's carbon tax is so revenue-neutral, it's actually negative.

To explain: the only way the government of the day could think of to sell the idea of a new tax was to introduce it with a raft of cuts to other taxes. And those cuts are actually greater than the revenue from the carbon tax. So today, emissions are rising and the government has less money than if it had never introduced the carbon tax at all.

But it is not just market mechanisms that the Leap rejects: it is market logic.

This is the **fourth** advance that the Manifesto makes in the climate fight, and from his writing on the subject, I believe it is the one that Tad finds most unseemly: the Leap addresses the climate crisis not as a technical problem to be solved by engineers, but as a crisis of a system and an economic philosophy. A worldview that has ploughed its way through the natural world like a 5<sup>th</sup> birthday party at an all-you-can-eat sundae station.

The Leap identifies the root cause of the climate crisis - it is the dominant economic logic of our time: extractivism to feed perpetual growth rooted in ever-increasing consumption.

Extractivism is, of course, the world view that sees everything as a commodity from which to extract value: first and foremost all natural resources, but also people – whether the labour of the working class or the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples – all commodified for maximum extraction of profit.

We even learned from The Panama Papers – remember them? – that the top 1% of the 1%, those who harvest their wealth from rigging the electronic casino of the financial system – they view the real economy itself as a commodity from which to extract wealth and stash it in their parallel, private offshore system.

These core underpinnings of our capitalism system are driving many of our society's ills: inequality, resource depletion, species extinction, neverending crimes against indigenous peoples, migrants and refugees and other marginalized communities.

But it is the climate crisis that is the most universal, most existential consequence of a system based on the absurd premise of infinite growth on a finite planet. That logic is on a collision course with our very survival.

And that is why it is such a major advance for the climate fight that the Leap puts another worldview front and centre: calling for an economy based not on extraction, but on caring. In place of endless competition and domination of nature, it tells a different story about our place in the world: it's a philosophy of interconnection, a call for a society based on an entirely different set of values.

The Leap doesn't argue for a moment that we have to wait for some future post-capitalist utopia in order to solve the climate crisis – anything but. It is filled with demands that must be met today. Yesterday.

But it is clear from its framing that it is the driving force of our capitalist system – extract and extract to consume and consume – that needs to be fundamentally addressed if we are to get off the road to climate oblivion.

That's a scary level of change, but it's honest.

And that's why tens of thousands of Canadians and hundreds of organizations have responded with such passion to the manifesto: it tells it like it is. And post 2008, people around the world are more ready than ever to hear that message.

But the Leap doesn't leave people in the lurch with a call to just Change Everything – it is a hopeful and inspiring document that focuses most on the better world we can build when we address intersecting crises at the roots.

And so, **fifth**, the Leap advances the fight against climate change by being hopeful rather than apocalyptic. It invites people to work for a better, more

satisfying and equitable life – it doesn't try to scare them into a bleak future of sacrifice.

And more than that - The Leap Manifesto embodies the **process** of how we can get from where we are to where we need to be.

It's an invitation – to emerge from the loneliness of our fear and connect the dots, to join and build a movement of movements.

This is an expression of a longstanding tradition of social change that builds pressure from below until what was previously unthinkable becomes irresistible. It's how we got many of the most cherished institutions of the welfare state, from universal suffrage to health care.

Tad has written that the Leap only appeals to a minority of Canadians. I beg to differ. Rather than presenting activism as some exclusive club, The Leap offers the most expansive vision of social movement action in recent history.

And that's no surprise, because it came out of a once-in-a-generation gathering of people dedicated to a huge spectrum of different causes.

Faith leaders, food justice folks, enviros of all stripes, leaders of the largest trade unions in the country, first nations, tar sands workers and even a number of Albertans who now have senior posts in the provincial government. Yeah, that's a big tent.

Let's face it – to really change course in Canada, we're going to have to take on the most powerful interest in human history – the fossil fuel industry. It has trillions in future profits on the line. If it burns all that carbon, we're toast.

And the only way to beat a small group of powerful people with a huge amount to lose is to build a vast movement of people with everything to

gain. For the 99% to join hands and tap the government on the shoulder with unmistakable force and say: hey, we're the majority. You need to rule in our interest.

This is not an elite theory of change or an inside strategy – this is classic social movement pressure. We have a long way to go and time is incredibly short, but this model of social transformation is having a tremendous comeback already.

You can see it in all the pipelines that are stalled or actively resisted. You can see it in the new alliances that are stopping them – environmentalists, first nations, urban and rural communities, and an important sector of the trade union movement, working together despite historical differences.

You can see it right now in North Dakota, where that pipeline is meeting a solid wall of land defenders and their allies. Their bravery and commitment changed the position of their president – and now the momentum is in their favour.

You could see the power of activism that makes deep and broad connections just a week ago in London, where a small group from Black Lives Matter UK disrupted a runway. Their statement read,

"While at London City Airport a small elite is able to fly, in 2016 alone 3,176 migrants are known to have died or gone missing in the Mediterranean. Black people are the first to die, not the first to fly, in this racist climate crisis. We note, however, that the UK is willing to charter special flights to remove black people from the country based on their immigration status."

Yes, the climate crisis is not just an issue among many, it is not just a technical problem with a techno-fix. It's a message, telling us we need to fundamentally change course. It's a lens – that lights up the connections not just among our many social ills, but among the many constituencies who see

their fates bound up in a struggle for survival, a struggle we can only win with the broadest possible coalition.

And so the Leap Manifesto is unabashedly ambitious. And to return to where I started, it meets the measure of this historical moment by breaking free of the shackles of pessimism and the particular poverty of the imagination called realpolitik.

Instead, it advances the fight against climate change by moving the goal posts – by expanding our notion of what’s politically possible, by bringing a more exciting agenda into the mainstream.

Politics is often called “the art of the possible”. But if our response to the climate crisis remains within what’s currently considered politically possible, we face utter catastrophe. Our response should not be to shrink our demands to fit inside this little box. The Leap Manifesto aims to build pressure inside of it, until it expands – until it explodes – and we can put on the table solutions that are actually on the scale of the crisis they are trying to meet.

In other words, if the level and pace of change required is not feasible in our current political climate, our job is not to work within the limp limits of what is feasible. Our job is to **change** what is feasible.

The very fact that we’re debating the Leap Manifesto tonight is proof that it is helping advance the climate fight by ratcheting up ambition – not just on temperature targets, but on the necessary material and political conditions, the balance of forces in society – that will make genuine climate action a reality.