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Notes for opening remarks

Debate with Avi Lewis on the Leap Manifesto, September 15, 2016

Resolved: The Leap Manifesto advances the fight against climate change.

Thanks to organizers, esp. Avi and Roy and the Group of 78. Thanks to Verna and Inger

Avi and I agree on much more than we don't. Mustn't lose sight of that fact

LEAP MANIFESTO genuinely recognizes gravity of climate crisis

Recognizes radical change is needed, change commensurate with the magnitude of this crisis

Time has far passed for mere incrementalism

Ethically noble vision; I'd like to live in such a society: communitarian, redistributive, egalitarian, decentralized, and radically democratic.

This vision, however, is probably both technically and economically infeasible, for reasons I'll mention later this evening in our conversation.

In these opening remarks I'm going to highlight three main reasons I believe the LEAP MANIFESTO won't advance fight against climate change. The first two concern the document as a strategic move in the political "game" surrounding climate change in Canada. The last concerns the LEAP MANIFESTO's implicit theory of the cause of CC.

1. The LEAP MANIFESTO is profoundly divisive, because it seeks root-and-branch change in our current economic system and implies a Manichean worldview of "good guys" and "bad guys." So it inevitably and necessarily leaves a good fraction of Canadian society out of any political mobilization against CC. Specifically, it leave out those who don't believe our economic system needs to be radically

changed, which I suspect is about 70 to 80 percent of Canadians. This makes it a small-tent rather than a big-tent approach to addressing CC. And we desperately need a big tent.

Evidence of divisiveness: Highly conflicted reception in Canada, and split within NDP over document. I don't see how either of these outcomes has advanced Canada's effort to reduce CO2 emissions.

2. The LEAP MANIFESTO has muddled political goals, because it lumps together a host of only partially related issues, including support for indigenous rights, high-speed rail, local agriculture, greater openness to refugees, a national child-care program and a universal basic income, along with condemnations of fossil-fuel subsidies, government austerity, racial and gender inequality and international trade deals.

Because it spreads itself across so many issues, it reduces attention to the central matter of concern: CC

And it entangles CC with other contentious issues, so it helps to create an array of heated side debates.

My third reason for believing the LEAP MANIFESTO won't advance fight against climate change is, in a sense, an explanation of why the LEAP MANIFESTO's authors came up with something so divisive and muddled.

3. The LEAP MANIFESTO is implicitly anchored in an inaccurate understanding of the causes of CC. In the LEAP MANIFESTO's view, high carbon dioxide emissions and therefore CC are largely, if not solely, a result of our current predatory and exploitative economic system.

Let's call this system oligopolistic, extractive capitalism—I'll just call "capitalism" from here on. Underpinning the LEAP MANIFESTO appears to be the assumption that this economic system is the fundamental cause of both deepening inequities and social injustices in Canada and worsening climate change. So inequity and climate change are flip sides of the same causal coin. That's why these issues are given equal priority in the LEAP MANIFESTO, from the opening lines.

I completely agree that inequity and CC are both profoundly important issues. But they don't have exactly the same roots.

I'm much more convinced about the strength of the links between capitalism and inequity than I am about the strength of the links between capitalism and CC.

First, you don't have to have capitalism to get massive environmental destruction, including huge emissions of carbon dioxide. Wholly non-capitalist economic systems have been among the most environmentally destructive, and biggest emitters, in human history. Take the Soviet Union.

Second, capitalism (even the oligopolistic, extractive capitalism we're talking about here), by itself, isn't enough to generate CC. A moment's thought shows that there are many other causal factors involved—from the nature of carbon energy, to the nature of human psychology, to the structure of the global political system.

Many of these other factors are just as important, and probably much more important, causes of climate change, and of the policy gridlock around climate change, than capitalism. Here is a short list of 7:

1. fossil fuels are a wonderful source of energy (power and energy density, low volatility etc.)
2. because they're wonderful, regardless of type of economic system in question, their extraction and use produces massive concentrations of economic power, which can torque political and economic system in favour of their further extraction;
3. CC problem is largely invisible, can't see CO₂ and CC's consequences don't happen near in time and space to emissions, so the motivation to do something about the problem is reduced;
4. attribution of weather events to CO₂ emissions is extremely difficult;
5. humans have a propensity to discount future events;
6. human have a propensity for motivated inference to defend worldviews;

7. cutting carbon emissions is nightmarish global collective action problem, because we're dealing with 170+ sovereign nation states, at least 20 of which are major CO2 emitters.

None of these factors is causally related to or involves capitalism in any essential way. But they're all vital causes of our current climate change crisis.

Now, let me be very clear. I'm not saying oligopolistic, extractive capitalism isn't part of the causal package in Canada—of course it is. But it's just a part, and perhaps not even the most important part.

In fact, we're ALL implicated as causal agents in climate change. It's not simple, as the LEAP MANIFESTO implies, to divide people and entities (including corporations) in our society into "good guys" and "bad guys." We're all bad guys in some way or other, and most of us—including many corporations—have the potential to become good guys in the fight against climate change.

In fact, there's real potential to turn the forces of capitalism against the prevailing carbon regime—something I can talk about later this evening.

So, if inequity and climate change aren't flip sides of the same causal coin—and if the struggles against these problems are, in a sense, distinct "fights"—much of the underlying logic of the Leap Manifesto unravels.

And if we have to choose between fights, if we have to choose where to invest our resources for massive political action, I'd choose the fight against climate change.

For me, it's clear: climate change is an existential threat to our species. Economic and social inequity, although enormous moral calamities in their own right, are not an existential threat. And in fact, if we don't slow climate change, the resulting social and economic unraveling will make the moral threat of inequity vastly worse.

In sum, the LEAP MANIFESTO is well-intentioned and passionate. But because it's anchored in a flawed understanding of the roots of our shared CC problem, it's muddled, distracting, and socially divisive.

Basically, in the vicious politics surrounding climate change, issuing the LEAP MANIFESTO was strategic error. It played directly into the hands of people opposed to aggressive climate policy and who claim the entire issue is a scam to allow a hyper-intrusive state to grab people's wealth.

The LEAP MANIFESTO does not advance the fight against climate change.