

The Abyss...and the Leap: Expanding Canada's 'Shrivelled' Political Horizons

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We live in an age of multiple and overlapping crises – environmental deterioration, social exclusion, economic inequality, and political alienation – each sufficient to provoke widespread resistance but now combining to reveal the devastating consequences of unbridled capitalism. How those on the *democratic socialist* left – not the so-called ‘centre left’ of neoliberal-lite mainstream parties – respond to widespread disenchantment with the post-Crash ‘status quo’ is a subject of intense debate, both creative and divisive, in Canada as elsewhere in the world.

Are we at a moment of productive linkage between popular resistance and political reformation? Can we, this time, build a socialist reality from the grassroots and prevent the absorption of radical critique by establishment elites? Although Bernie Sanders deserves the label of a social democrat rather than

his preferred moniker of democratic socialist, the success of his candidacy in so very nearly securing the *Democratic* nomination by drawing on the street heat protests born of widespread disenchantment with the dysfunctional and morally bankrupt economic system revealed by the 2008 crash gave many a giddy sense of possibility. Similarly, the stunning success of the UK *Momentum* movement in restoring the *Labour Party* (under the improbable leadership of Jeremy Corbyn) to its socialist senses, suggests a new dynamic between street protest and electoral struggle. But grave disappointments must also be acknowledged, primary among them *Syriza's* tragic failure to withstand intense neoliberal pressures in Greece.

In Canada the question of ‘what’s left?’ has been most acutely posed, if not fully answered, in the time-honoured form of a manifesto – *the Leap Manifesto* (2015) – which centers its call for change

on the need to confront the urgent environmental crisis facing us all by linking it to working class politics, the menace of militarism and, importantly, Indigenous rights in this Settler State. Remarkably enough this clarion call to confront the costs and consequences of the capitalist ethos governing (or, more accurately, mismanaging) all aspects of our lives nowhere features the word 'socialism', though its core project – a “transformation” to a new economy – clearly places the needs of *society* (and the environment) above the appetites of capital.

crisis – “a crime against humanity’s future” – can serve as the spark igniting such a transformation, as there is no other way *to* deal with the crisis than by redefining basic socio-economic and state structures. In turn, the Manifesto’s repeated defence of the inherent rights and title of the Indigenous peoples of Canada shines an unavoidably harsh light on both the resource-extracting capitalist project that Canada *is*, and the need to ‘indigenize’ and decolonize Canadian left-wing ‘alternatives’ traditionally rooted in extractive industrialism.



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Drafted by representatives of a diverse group of movements – labour, environmental, Indigenous rights and social justice – convened by best-selling author/activist Naomi Klein and documentary film maker Avi Lewis, the *Leap Manifesto* is grounded in a belief that, for all its horror, the climate

In place of an economy based on oil and gas megaprojects the Manifesto advocates a ‘leap’ to 100 per cent renewable electricity sources within 20 years. In place of “profit-gouging” private companies, or even state-run ones, it advocates “energy democracy”: innovative ownership structures

designed along egalitarian, redistributive lines. Declaring that “public scarcity in times of unprecedented private wealth is a manufactured crisis, designed to extinguish our dreams before they have a chance to be born”, it demands an end to: austerity; trade deals negotiated in the interests of corporations; fossil fuel subsidies; and excessive military spending. The Manifesto also backs a guaranteed annual income, proposes the imposition of financial transaction taxes, and advocates a massive “universal program” to build energy-efficient homes and retrofit old ones. These proposals are, crucially, coupled with the provision of “training and other resources for workers in carbon-intensive jobs, ensuring they are fully able to take part in the clean energy economy,” the details of which should be worked out with the participation of the workers themselves.

The *Leap Manifesto* was launched at a public event in September 2015 against the backdrop of a federal election in which the putatively left-wing *New Democratic Party* (NDP) shimmied so far to the right in the hopes of winning power that it was outflanked on the left by the mainstream *Liberal Party* of Justin Trudeau, happy to embrace budget deficits to increase public spending. The following year, the NDP – relegated from official opposition status to distant third behind the *Liberals* and *Conservatives* – met in a sombre mood,

withdrawing support from leader Tom Mulcair, a former *Liberal* Cabinet member in Quebec and ‘mastermind’ of the disastrously centrist campaign. The more profound issue for discussion, though, was the direction the chastened party would now take. Would it move back to the traditional centre left or into more radical, uncharted territory? Though not an official party faction, the ‘*Leapers*’ came to the 2016 convention in the hope of having the party adopt the Manifesto. Failing in that effort, a resolution passed which recognized and supported it as “a high-level statement of principles that speaks to the aspirations, history, and values of the party” and committed riding associations across the country to debating it. Although not adopted as policy ‘*Leap*’ had arrived as a major source of both inspiration and dissension, fundamentally altering internal party dynamics and the parameters of policy debate.

Since that breakthrough the *Leap* agenda has been fervently defended and as rigorously contested nationwide in NDP riding associations as well as unions, activist groups, student-led organizations and faith-based organizations. The *Canadian Labour Congress* (CLC) established *Labour for Leap*, linkages were made with the Sanders and Momentum campaigns, and early in 2018 Manifesto supporters organized *Courage to Leap*, an unofficial

gathering held alongside the annual NDP Convention but where, as was noted in media reports, barely 100 of the 500 activists in attendance were actually delegates to the Convention. Clearly there is no consensus about the wisdom of merging the movement with the party, a party that now has a young, charismatic leader, Jagmeet Singh, who has thus far been careful to neither reject nor accept the basic tenets of the Manifesto. Hard choices for both leadership and membership are at hand.

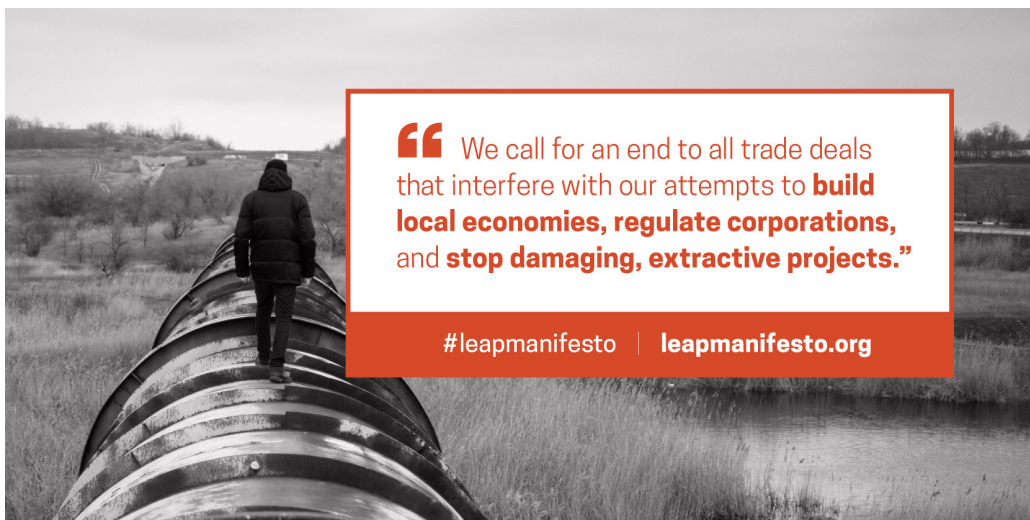
Unsurprisingly, the Manifesto has been pummelled from opposite directions. According to prominent mainstream journalist Lawrence Martin (2016), it “advocates that all oil be left in the ground and we bounce along happily on moonbeams and other rays”; another veteran columnist, Jeffrey Simpson (2016), declared the “anti-American” *Leapers* have “absolutely no idea of how to run a modern economy”, are “hostile to free markets except of the organic-market variety on Saturday mornings”, and are “committed to saving the environment at the expense of crucifying the economy.” For disgraced right-wing media mogul Conrad Black (2015) the Leapers are merely the latest last gasp of “the shattered Old Left” and constitute “the detritus of organized labor,” accompanied this time by “heavily buffeted eco-zealots” and “imperishable agitators for the native people”. An

editorial in the weekly newsmagazine *Macleans* defined the Manifesto as “the answer to a question no one is asking,” and asserted that in “a country born out of compromise and accommodation, extreme views of any sort are (thankfully) seen as un-Canadian.” This complacently nationalist stance was also adopted by NDP strategist-turned-pundit Robin Sears (2016), who warned of a “suicidal leap to the left” by “loony leapers” emulating “earlier Trotskyite and Marxist entryists”. Sears was, though, hopeful this laughable “Birkenstock Left” would soon be unceremoniously “returned to their more traditional perch outside the mainstream party.”

For those at the *International Communist League* (2016) the Manifesto is, in its refusal to “look to the proletariat as the motor force for human progress” a “reactionary” document resorting to “bourgeois economic policy”. Deriding the Manifesto’s focus on the global climate crisis, the ICL insists “modern infrastructure, including pipelines as well as hydroelectric projects and the like, is essential to the function of an advanced industrial economy,” in other words an extractive capitalism generating sufficient class contradictions to “win the working class to the perspective of a socialist revolution which will rip the mines, factories and other means of production from the grip of the exploiters, paving the way

for a rationally planned, collectivized economy.” Massive resource extraction will not, apparently, have negative environmental consequences when owned by the government. Perhaps this is how the Trudeau government can claim to be the green government Canadians have been waiting for while at the same time spending C\$4.5 billion dollars to purchase the failed *Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain Pipeline* in order to save a project widely condemned by environmental and Indigenous rights movements.

Leap Manifesto, arguing instead that the vague document fails to tackle the crucial issue of inequality and instead focuses on resource extraction. Laxer poses a number of questions: How do we build the new green economy? How do we create the new green industries that will be at the heart of the economy? How do we ensure that large corporations no longer set the economic agenda and that the rich pay their share of taxes? Unfairly, in my view, he argues that these questions “are given very short shift in Leap” and derides what he sees



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But what of those voices who have tried in the past to move the *New Democratic Party* toward a socialist vision? As one of the founders of the short-lived (1969-1974) but intellectually influential *Movement for an Independent Socialist Canada* – the so-called *Waffle* – James Laxer’s critique deserves special attention. Laxer (2016) fails to see the socialism claimed by advocates of the

as an argument in favour of creating jobs in “a host of caregiving sectors” coupled with a dubious commitment to a shift to local agriculture. Sympathizing with those who suggest that *Leap* “is a document for elites and not the majority of Canadians”, Laxer concludes: “I don’t see the Leap as a manifesto of the left.” His ideological measuring stick is clearly that of his earlier attempt to utilize a

political party for radical ends. With all due respect to Laxer it is important to note that we stand on very different ground today, ground that we must acknowledge – as the *Leap Manifesto* does, but the Waffle movement did not – is the territory of Indigenous people under existential threat from the industrial policies of both left- and right-wing strategies determined to extend industrial development and economic growth.

The Waffle Manifesto of 1969 was laser-focused on the lack of independence of the Canadian economy which had become nothing more than a “resource base and consumer market within the American Empire”, an “economic colony of the United States”. Asking Canadians to consider the nature of the American Empire – its militarism, its racism and its corporate capitalism – Laxer and his colleagues asked Canadians to recognize that there can be no economic independence in the absence of socialism, a society based on “democratic control of all institutions, which have a major effect on men’s lives and where there is equal opportunity for creative non-exploitative self-development... A socialist transformation of society will return to man his sense of humanity, to replace his sense of being a commodity.” The *Waffle Manifesto* insisted on democracy at all levels (neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces, cooperatives),

recognized socialism as both a “process and a program”, and concluded that the crucial goal was the “extensive public control over investment and nationalization of the commanding heights of the economy, such as the essential resources industries, finance and credit, and industries strategic to planning our economy.” The *Waffle* activists believed that, if radicalized from within, the *New Democratic Party*, could affect the “fundamental change” necessary to build this new society.

With different definitions of ‘new’ and ‘fundamental’ this is also the hope of the *Leapers* and one ironic effect of their movement has been to spur numerous journalists (and interested citizens) to revisit the ‘Waffle Moment’. The fact the initial impulse was to compare *Leap* with its more explicitly (that is, more “orthodox”) socialist predecessor backs Albo’s (1990) claim that the Waffle’s legacy “is surely *cultural*, in the fullest sense of that word, influencing intellectual debate and political visions long after its dissolution.”

The contrast between the two Manifestos is stark indeed. Setting aside the gender-specific nature of the *Waffle Manifesto* (surely retrograde even by 1969 standards), its argument that socialism would help unite English and French Canada ignored the plight and rights of Indigenous peoples, the discrimination faced by many non-white

settlers, and environmental despoliation on an already-epic scale. For the *Leapers*, the notion of nationalized control of resource extraction as a solution to economic inequality not only ignores the ongoing assault on Indigenous peoples but is a literally self-defeating proposition: there are, to borrow the pithy phrase of those trade unionists intent on building a climate justice movement, “no jobs on a dead planet.” (cited by Egan, 2015)

a giant, self-destructive machine. Laxer, stating the colonially obvious in noting the Canadian economy has been centred on “primary sector industries since Europeans first settled on Indigenous land,” suggests the *Leapers* offer “little common ground for dialogue,” lauding instead the efforts of Alberta’s pro-pipeline, pro-Tar Sands NDP Premier Rachel Notley to “push both a green and an egalitarian agenda.” To the *Leap Left*, though, there is *nothing* redeemable,



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In sum, different assumptions about basic threats (American ownership vs. environmental collapse) necessarily lead in different directions. Left wing critics of the *Leap Manifesto*, however, are wrong to argue it shows no concern for those many Canadians working in resource extraction. Indeed, *Leap’s* entire *modus operandi* is to *transition* to a new economy expressly benefiting those currently hired merely as cogs in

green or egalitarian, about evidently unsustainable, colonially presumptive ‘pipeline Progressivism’. In the words of Crystal Lameman (2018), an Indigenous woman from the *Beaver Lake Cree Nation* in Alberta and one of the Manifesto’s drafters: “From where I stand, the *Leap Manifesto* isn’t an attack on Albertans or its workers. It’s a gift, offering us a pathway to a more human, healthy and liveable province, one that honours the

treaty rights of indigenous peoples and meets the needs of all its inhabitants.”

At its worst, Canadian Marxism still continues to peddle Eurocentric notions of evolutionary stages of history (thereby considering Indigenous communities to be a less developed version of ‘us’), thus failing, as Deborah Simmons (2013) has argued, to “recognize the ways in which radical indigenous resurgence can pose significant obstacles to capitalist expansion in renewing traditional modes of taking care of the land.” *The Leap Manifesto* makes no such mistake: but how widely will its cri de cœur – not just for the rejection of capitalism, but the thoroughgoing decolonization of *socialism* – be heeded?

It is certainly the case that the recent profusion (and intersection) of protest against the manifest, manifold injustice of our time has opened new strategic possibilities for not just taking but *changing* power. While the mainstream media (and their status quo backers) happily mock *Occupy Wall Street*, *Idle No More*, *Black Lives Matter*, *Leap* and other movements for their supposed naivety and ‘leaderlessness’, something profound is going on, a decisive, creative, often irreverent rejection of ‘business-as-usual,’ of the hollowness of tried-and-failed ‘solutions’ across the so-called political ‘spectrum’.

There is no guarantee of success or shortage of cautionary tales of division and defeat in Canada and elsewhere. In the case of the *Leap Manifesto*, the list of organizational endorsements is lengthy, impressive, and demonstrates the exciting linkages being made across myriad movements and campaigns. The question remains: is the NDP the right vehicle to maintain such momentum? The party has shifted dramatically to the right since the days of the *Waffle Movement* – even ‘cleansing’ its constitution, in Blairite fashion, of all language construable as socialist – and if it was not sufficiently radical to take seriously the demands of 1969, it is far less ready to embrace radical change now. But the mention of Blair is deliberate, as his Orwellian project to make the *Labour Party* ‘New’ – safe, that is, for capitalism (and prone to war) – ended not just in electoral defeat but the recapture of the party by people (in the hundreds of thousands) who understand the capacity and *point* of the party to transform their society and lives.

A clear-eyed realization of the pitfalls is necessary, but cynicism is not warranted. It is true that *Leap* is short on specifics, but Manifestos rarely offer detailed blueprints. In it we see a profound spirit of radicalism, recognizing the necessity of constructing alliances with all those engaged in the struggle for human – and natural – justice. This is, as Avi

Lewis (in Apostolov, 2018) has argued, “a time when everything is at play,” a “moment” that demands our creative attention if we are to “connect the dots among the different crises and different solutions and crises.” The task is made difficult not least, he argues, because “we have dealt with the shrivelling of the political imagination in Canada for decades.” Can those who support the *Leap Manifesto* offer the kind of unifying social, political and economic vision necessary to frame a counter-hegemonic challenge sufficiently broad to encourage wide-spread acceptance of its “common sense” articulation of the problems we collectively face? Changing our idea of what politics and power are and can be is a necessary starting point and, to that extent, the *Leap Manifesto* – with its dedication to a dramatically different economy, based on a transformed Settler-Indigenous relationship, egalitarian principles, a green economy, and social justice for all – provides the momentum to start the journey.

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