



# Avi Lewis: Why We Should All Leap

This is an image from the film *This Changes Everything*. The film shows how climate change is affecting people all over the world, causing droughts, wildfires, intense summer heat, violent storms and more.



Partners in life and partners in conviction and social activism, Avi Lewis and Naomi Klein make a formidable team. Through documentary film and writing, the two combined their talents to create *This Changes Everything* – a film and book by the same name. Then came the “Leap Manifesto” a political document meant to change how people think and act on climate change and economic inequality. Avi Lewis spoke with us recently about *This Changes Everything* and the Leap Manifesto.

**CP: The book, the documentary and the Leap Manifesto – you did it as a three platform approach. Why did you choose to present it this way?**

**AL:** We set out almost eight years ago on this sprawling multi-platform initiative with the conviction that to really introduce big, bold ideas into a very cluttered culture we needed to come at people from as many angles as possible. The book provided the opportunity to really lay out the master narrative and very detailed arguments with lots of proof. The film is a streamlined take on the thesis (examining the root

causes of the climate crisis in extractivist capitalism) that emphasizes emotion and people on the front lines. When I was finishing the film I felt very strongly that the political demands that came out of our thesis needed to be in the movie, but every time I tried to put them in it felt like a pamphlet or a laundry list, so in the end I took them out of the film because they just weren’t convincing as narrated arguments. But then we had the crazy idea to try to launch a political manifesto at the same time as the film, and as soon as that was proposed it felt completely right. The Leap Manifesto, as a political document,

has its own language and its own cadence and its own social and cultural form, and that's where the demands really belonged. As soon as we made that decision we realized it wasn't our job to make up the demands for a movement of movements. And so that's when we convened a historic meeting in May 2015 where we brought together activists from all different causes, from all around the country and laid the groundwork for what would be a consensus document, which is what the Leap Manifesto is.

### **CP: And what has the response been like?**

**AL:** There has been a tidal wave of response. There have been two very different kinds. The response from the establishment: the corporate media, most of the political class, although not all of it, and the entire political pundit class has been entirely, overwhelmingly negative and fear-mongering. Some of those responses really show how this document has gotten under the skin of the people who benefit so mightily from the status quo. Brian Mulroney was trotted out from retirement to tell a business audience that the Leap Manifesto is "a new philosophy of economic nihilism" that "must be resisted and defeated." The *Globe and Mail* editorial board called it "madness," Rex Murphy milked like four columns bashing the Leap Manifesto, but of course, as probably Canada's foremost climate denier, that's not all that surprising from him. Conrad Black was rushing into the fray to smear us. All of these mainstream responses completely mischaracterized the Leap Manifesto. But the responses were to a clichéd version of environmentalism and nothing could be further from what the Leap Manifesto actually is.

The other main response was from people – from Canadians. We've been absolutely overwhelmed by the chord that this has struck with many people who live on Turtle Island. More than 40,000 have signed now, more than 200 organizations have signed, and every day our inboxes have more requests from community groups who want to do public discussions, who want to volunteer and help out, who want to get involved in the many struggles that make up the constellation of the Leap. I find this extremely heartening because we are clearly frightening the powerful and

we are clearly empowering everyone else. And that strikes me as exactly what social movements ought to do.

### **CP: What in this message is resonating with people so much?**

**AL:** People know in their bones that we are really screwed as a species unless we have transformative change immediately. We can see with our own eyes every single day around the world that the climate catastrophe is unfolding even faster than scientists have predicted. And that science was already really scary so most people are dealing with a latent level of panic. When they look at government responses they either get flowery words – which is what we have in Canada since we changed governments a year ago – or they see incremental approaches and market measures like cap and trade plans in Ontario and Quebec, or paltry carbon taxes like in B.C. that don't get anywhere near the level that would be required to actually reduce carbon emissions. People are smart and they perceive a vast chasm between the urgency of the crisis and the level of ambition that is on offer from our governments in terms of a response. So the Leap Manifesto, which treats the crisis as one requiring transformative change, has resonated for that reason. But also, and I think more importantly, the Leap Manifesto tells a story about the kind of world we want – so rather than try to scare people into action, it seeks to inspire them with an ambitious and positive agenda. And that agenda isn't just to respond to the climate crisis, but to the sick economic system that is creating it, as well as with a host of related crises like our relationship with First Nations, our callous treatment of migrants and refugees, deep inequality and structural racism in society – all the intersecting crises that we know need urgent response.

### **CP: What do you think the biggest challenges are to get this change?**

**AL:** There is a tremendous amount of power and wealth invested in maintaining the status quo. So just like with corporate trade deals, just like with the right to water – thinking of other great Council of Canadians causes – just like with First Nations struggles, in order to win these necessary victories for people we have to confront the most powerful actors in our society: corporations and the governments that serve them. There is no shortcut. The Leap Manifesto doesn't

pretend we can avoid the actual clash of interests in society. Look at the fossil fuel industry – the most powerful and wealthiest industry in human history. It has trillions of dollars of future profits to lose and it's fighting like its life is on the line. So that's what we are up against. That's why we have to build a movement of movements and connect the dots between all the different issues that people are fighting for so that we can build a much larger group of people who have everything to gain – a better, fairer world with more justice for everyone.

### **CP: What advice would you give to somebody who wants to be involved?**

**AL:** I think the Leap Manifesto is an invitation to look around at the different issues and struggles in your own community and see how they are connected and then to try to make your activism into the living connective tissue that will unite movements across the spectrum. In downtown Toronto, where I live, we have a terrific movement coming from labour and other allies around the fight for \$15 – the \$15 minimum dollar wage. This already brings together precarious and non-unionized workers with trade unions and other social forces. We have a divestment movement on campuses – young people trying to get their universities to divest from fossil fuels, churches doing the same. So I'm lucky to live in a big city with a large population with a lot of activism, but we have to be able to see the threads that connect the dots among all the issues we see around us. So as far as the "what can I do?" question goes, I think where the Leap can help is to serve as an invitation to look at your own local landscape of causes and see how they are brought together by an analysis of climate change, inequality and racism in society and to get out there and help out in all the different ways that activists do. I think what the Leap adds to the work of specific issued-based struggles is a systemic analysis, a way of seeing the causes as connected, and a meeting place for people to come together beyond their silos.

### **CP: Are there next steps for the Leap Manifesto?**

**AL:** Big time! [laughs] After a truly extraordinary roller coaster of a first year the people who continue to do organizing around the Leap Manifesto – we are a team of four or five people – we took a breath over



Avi Lewis (front right) and cinematographer Mark Ellam film *This Changes Everything* in New York City.

Ed Kashi

the summer and looked each other in the eye and asked: should we call it? Should we declare victory and move on, or do we have a hell of a lot more work to do? And there was no hesitation as we recommitted to doubling down on the work of the Leap. So our first step was to zoom out and actually identify the kinds of interventions that we've been able to make in the culture in the last year – get clear on what we've discovered we can do. We haven't made any decisions and we are actively seeking the input of allies to work out what our best next steps could be. We've been asking ourselves some questions like: Should we try to work with social movements across Turtle Island to deepen the Leap vision and create a kind of platform like the Movement for Black Lives has created in the U.S.? In other words, should we expand the Leap Manifesto into a much more specific, policy-based vision? Should we have a national convention

where we bring together people to launch a platform like that? Should we continue to annoy the powerful, have twitter wars with Brad Wall, and fight the battle of big ideas in the culture? To what extent can we give people tools to self-organize around the Leap Manifesto? This is the thing that we are most excited about. Looking at the Bernie Sanders campaign and other movements that have allowed people to self-organize – that have trusted and empowered the grassroots supporters of any particular cause and given people tools to use in their own communities – that's a direction we know we want to take.

**CP: I know our Council of Canadians chapters really responded to the Leap Manifesto**

**AL:** There is no single organization that has responded as vigorously and as inspiringly as the Council of Canadians – both to *This Changes Everything*, book and film,

and to the Leap Manifesto. We've been staggered and really, really touched by how Council supporters and Council chapters have taken up the document and organized local meetings and town halls, film screenings and book clubs. I think we feel that the Council is the national movement organization that really gets the Leap Manifesto in its bones. Of course there are many other partners in our broad, broad coalition who fight on their issues and make connections, but for decades now the Council has been in the business of connecting the dots on different issues and I think that's why there has been such a close working relationship between Leap and the Council.

*The Council of Canadians welcomed Avi Lewis as a keynote speaker at our annual conference in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, in October. For more information about the Leap Manifesto visit [www.leapmanifesto.org](http://www.leapmanifesto.org)*