

# Stephen Lewis

In a roomful of stuffy diplomats, Stephen Lewis stands out for his powerful rhetoric and punchy humor. More than once, his habit for speaking uncomfortable truths has shamed governments into action.

When Stephen Lewis talks, things happen.

Take, for example, the case of the cytologists. In May, Lewis spoke at the International Society for Analytical Cytology's annual meeting in Quebec City. Lewis, who is the UN's special envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, had never heard of the group and had to look up 'cytology': the study of cells.

Lewis spoke of CD4 machines—which measure the number of CD4 immune cells and indicate whether someone with AIDS should be treated—that are bulky, difficult to use and, at about \$50,000 each, vastly out of the reach of most of the continent.

He challenged the cytologists to make a machine that is portable and easy to use—and inspired a scientist to do exactly that.

J. Paul Robinson, president of the society, and his colleagues worked tirelessly for three months, developing a prototype that met Lewis's description—and that could cost as little as \$4,000. Their project, dubbed 'Cytometry for Life,' has already attracted \$250,000 in unrestricted funds.

Robinson, who met Lewis for the first time in May, is now one of his biggest fans and gives out dozens of copies of Lewis's book, *Race Against Time*. "[Lewis] is the sort of person that once he sets a challenge to you and you look at him, you can't tear away," Robinson says.

The son of David Lewis, one of the architects of Canada's leftist New Democratic Party, Lewis himself was a leader in the party. From 1984 through 1988, he served as Canada's ambassador to the UN, which he says gave him an introduction to the "impenetrable, labyrinthine" ways of the agency. He then became deputy executive director of UNICEF from 1995–1999. In 2001, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan appointed him in the envoy role, the first position of its kind.

"The whole experience of the last five-plus years has been so intensely fascinating, depressing, upsetting, hopeful, such a strange coursing combination of emotions and responses," Lewis says.

Although Lewis has dedicated his entire life to social justice, it is only recently that he has gained international acclaim. "He frankly was not well known outside Canada—where he walks on air, or perhaps even on water—but he has become an international figure who beats up national governments," says Gerry Caplan, Lewis's advisor for 50 years.

At the international AIDS meeting in Toronto, Lewis was ubiquitous, here railing against the Bush administration's policies on condoms, there denouncing South Africa's health minister, and everywhere speaking truths few people would dare utter—prompting former President Bill Clinton at one point to tell him, "The world owes you a debt."

Lewis is a powerful speaker, rattling off facts and figures, his voice rising and falling and building to an emotional denouement. He is wildly popular, his passion, sincerity and unexpected sense of humor drawing a sharp contrast with his more cautious colleagues. Last year, *Time* magazine dubbed him one of the world's 100 most influential people. And one Internet petition nominating him for a Nobel Peace Prize has garnered more than 23,000 signatures.

"To me he is the definition of a true leader," says Paula Donovan, who advises Lewis on women's issues.

Even Lewis's family is, as he puts it, "totally, totally

mired in ideology." His wife of 43 years, Michele Landsberg—whom Lewis met and married within the course of a month—is a noted feminist and newspaper columnist. His three children and daughter-in-law Naomi Klein—author of the anti-globalization manifesto *No Logo*—are also deeply political.

Lewis has 24 honorary doctorates, but never finished college. "He was more interested in saving the world quickly," says Caplan. With the help of his small team, Lewis reads incessantly and soaks up information to compile his devastating indictments.

On 24 August, for instance, he released a statement comparing the monthly cost of the Iraq war—\$8 billion, according to the US congressional research service—to the same amount the entire world spent on AIDS in 2005. "Suddenly you have a juxtaposition based on authentic fact which no one can answer," he says. "It vividly creates the scale of human priorities."

Unlike most diplomats, Lewis goes beyond leaders to meet those who are directly grappling with the pandemic. He can engage 12-year-old junior farmers or 80-year-old grandmothers with equal ease. In one instance, Lewis wore a grass skirt, danced with the locals and later met the First Lady of Zambia in the same outfit. "She seemed a little taken aback," he says.

Lewis speaks "with rather than on behalf of people in developing countries," says Sisonke Msimang, program manager for the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa. Honoring that quality, the group this year launched "the Stephen Lewis Fighting Spirit Award," to be given each year to an African woman engaged in battling AIDS. "That meant more to me than most things I've received in life," Lewis says. "I was really moved by that."

The same qualities that make Lewis so popular among those on the ground have frequently landed him in trouble with world leaders. After he made sharply critical comments about the US government's emphasis on abstinence, the US state department made a formal complaint against him, "to hang me from the highest tree," he says. The government of South Africa has also banned Lewis from performing his duties as envoy in that country until he apologizes to the health minister.

But Lewis continues to speak against what he sees as "unconscionable neglect" and "reckless indifference" to AIDS. "I think the global community has responded lamentably," he says, his voice rising. "We're fighting for human lives, what in God's name is wrong with these people?"

Lewis's most recent crusade has been for a UN agency dedicated entirely to women. "I have watched the faces of women young and old, stoic, formidable, loving, courageous, beyond the capacity of words to define, I have watched those faces disappear," he says. "It is unbearable."

The existing agency, UNIFEM, has little power and a miniscule budget. In February, two days after a UN reform panel was launched with only 3 women of 15 members, Lewis publicly drew attention to the inequity at a Harvard University speech. The panel has since reportedly decided on the value of a more powerful women's agency. If that's true, says Lewis, "that would be the most important thing that has come from me."

Within the UN, Lewis's tendency to speak his mind and the accompanying attention has made not a few people jealous and uncomfortable. His tenure at the UN is set to end in December, and he does not expect to be asked to continue. "I won't have that opportunity, I've ruffled too many feathers," he says.

In the meantime, he is teaching at McMaster University, writing another book and planning to continue his work independent of the UN. "I mean if you're not struggling for social justice and equality," he asks, "why are you on the planet?"

Apoorva Mandavilli, New York



Nick Wiebe 2006