

Lewis condemns health service cutbacks, dodges education issue in speech at York

"The politician of the proletariat" exposes the "perverse logic" behind the provincial government's health services cutbacks. They may be the election issue he's been looking for. But to universities, Lewis offers small comfort.

By OAKLAND ROSS

Looking a trifle ashen but otherwise in top form, Ontario NDP leader Stephen Lewis kept a large audience leaning forward in its seats for over an hour in Curtis lecture hall L last Wednesday — even though he barely touched on government restraint in funding to universities, which is presumably what everyone had come to hear.

DAZZLING DISPLAY

Instead, he devoted his speech to an attack on cutbacks in Ontario health services. It was a dazzling display of oratory — by turns casual, hilarious and cutting — and it left the distinct impression that the NDP may have found the issue it needs to topple the precarious Conservative minority government.

Thanks to the caprices or intrigues of campus organizers, Lewis and federal finance minister Donald MacDonald were booked to appear before different audiences in different halls in the same building at the same time last week.

HIS OWN GLORY

"I want to thank everyone for coming to listen to the politician of the proletariat rather than crossing the hall to bask in the glory of the monarchy," joked Lewis.

But the leader of Her Majesty's Official Opposition had a little glory of his own to bask in. His words now carry the weight of 38 seats in the legislature.

Lewis, who arrived slightly late and out of breath, first loosened up his audience with a series of jabs at the government side of the House.

He took shots at several Conservative MPPs including Margaret Scrivener who, according to Lewis, singlehandedly lost at least eight seats in Toronto for the Tories during the last election.

AUTUMN SESSION

But the short autumn session of the House "gave us all a little heart about the nature of minority government," he said. "Cabinet ministers occasionally condescended to visit the House and we passed some good, sound legislation."

The honeymoon may now be over.

"The NDP is becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the position of the Tory government with regard to cutbacks and restraints," said Lewis. "We are entering a new period in the politics of confrontation. It used to be a tactic just for labour disputes; now it is employed everywhere."

PERVERSE LOGIC

Lewis objected vehemently to the "high-handed manner" in which the cutbacks in Ontario

health services have been handled. It is an indication, he said, of the "relentlessly perverse logic of which only Tories are capable."

According to Lewis, hospital administrators across the province have been informed of the cutbacks, not diplomatically through personal contact with government officials, but by reading about them in press releases or in newspapers.

Lewis scoffed at the government claim that the cutbacks have been made in the name of improving health care. He used the proposed closing of the North Bay health care laboratory as an example. The government claims that it will save the taxpayer \$245,000 a year by closing the facility. Lewis outlined what he sees as the absurdity of this claim.

A SAVING?

All the salaried personnel, in keeping with a government commitment, will have to be employed elsewhere; there will be the added cost of courier service to convey lab samples to other areas; mobile units will have to be brought to North Bay to handle testing; labs in other communities will have to be expanded in order to take care of the increased load.

"How can the government do all this and still call it a saving?" Lewis asked.

HUMAN SIDE

The cutbacks in health services have their human side as well, Lewis described an old man he had seen in a hallway of the soon-to-be-closed Goderich psychiatric hospital during a recent tour. The man, an outpatient who comes to the hospital a couple of times a week to receive emotional support from the staff, was sitting alone in



During his speech last Thursday, Lewis criticized the anti-inflation board's emphasis on wage, rather than price, control. "No one knows what the AIB will do next," he said.



Peter Hsu photo

Stephen Lewis was interviewed by reporters from radio station CKEY and by CITY TV in the Excalibur lounge immediately after his speech last Thursday at York. During the interview, he called the govern-

ment's Henderson Report "a piece of Conservative, rhetorical baggage". He predicted that the government will raise tuition fees "in a year or two", and called a spring election a possibility.

the hall, labouring with trembling hands over a piece of crochet-work.

Lewis asked the Goderich chief-of-staff, a man named Moriarty, what will happen to this man if the hospital is closed down as planned.

"He'll be closed down, too," said Moriarty.

NO PRICE INTERVENTION

Lewis also criticized the federal anti-inflation board which, he says, has not made one "significant" price intervention since it was established. Even Ziggy's, the high-priced, specialty food outlet of Loblaws, which according to Lewis would have been perfect as a sacrificial lamb, got off scot-free.

"But the workers have had their

increases interfered with almost everyday."

"No one knows what the AIB will do next," said Lewis. "No one knows what side of the bed Jean Luc Pepin will get out of in the morning."

ACQUISITIVE LUST

Lewis cited the recent wage settlement of the University of Toronto library workers (some of whom were earning little more than \$5,000 a year). Their increase was reduced by the AIB from 18 per cent to 12 per cent "in order to contain the acquisitive lust" of the librarians.

"No one disputes the need for cutbacks and restraint," said Lewis, "but the Tory priorities are not ours."

"The NDP has no illusions about the future — it's always a tough road, but we're looking forward to the next round. We are willing to confront the Tories frontally — and just as we occasionally lose governments (as in B.C. recently), we may elect another."

DODGED THE ISSUE

After his speech, Lewis entertained questions from the audience. Predictably, these dealt mainly with restraint in post-secondary education funding. Lewis had successfully dodged the issue during his speech and he talked around during the question period.

"The irony of it all — and it is an irony," he said, "is that post-secondary education has escaped the fiercest retrenchment. This year, universities have received an increase in funding (about 14 per cent) and that should tide them through the year."

"How it happened, I don't know. Ian Macdonald must still have more clout with the Conservative cabinet than I do."

DOLLAR TERMS

Lewis criticized the Council of Ontario Universities for addressing the issue of funding to universities strictly in dollar terms.

"The NDP is asking fairly fun-

damental questions," he said.

He quoted MPP for Riverdale James Renwick who says that for immigrant and working class people in his riding, "the university is trespass" — it is just not one of the possibilities they consider for themselves or for their children.

FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

"In straight funding and dollar terms, I don't know," said Lewis. "The NDP platform maintains that there should be no tuition — I'm not sure if that's legitimate. We should value post-secondary education and work it out with the universities, but the government should speak more about purpose and access. These fundamental questions are more valuable than the dollar terms."

BUM STEER

The question period was cut short to make way for the Whole Earth Days series which had booked the hall for events that afternoon. York NDP club president Barry Edson kept poking Lewis in the back in an effort to remove him from the stage.

"I hate being directed from behind," muttered Lewis as he left.

Afterwards, Lewis was asked about the establishment of unions for university faculty in Ontario — with special reference to the charge that they may thwart the traditional premium which professors have placed upon excellence.

THE OLD STORY

"Ah," he smiled. "It's the old story of being sullied simply by touching the ideas of the working class — let alone having your jacket ripped by coming into contact with the workers themselves."

"Needless, to say, I do not subscribe to that theory."

Having said that, Lewis was whisked off to Hamilton to give more speeches and to provide further hints of an imminent provincial election.