

Conservative leader pledges to put ?people ahead of government?



By Brock Weir

Andrew Scheer will mark his first year as leader of the Conservative Party of Canada this month.

In the 12 months since his election to replace Stephen Harper as the Party's permanent leader, and succeed Rona Ambrose as Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Scheer has criss-crossed the country meeting with Canadians from coast to coast and, in doing so, says he sees a ?unique opportunity? to speak to Canadians.

Mr. Scheer sat down for a one-on-one interview with The Auroran on Saturday afternoon as he made a number of stops in York Region and Peel.

His first interview with The Auroran shortly after his appointment to the Party's top job was in the middle of swirling controversy over the Liberal Government's changes to payroll taxes, an issue which raised concerns from business owners small and large.

Nearly a year on, Mr. Scheer says the issue of ?affordability? remains top of mind for many Canadians.

?Something that is really emerging is a lot of Canadians in every region being very concerned about the affordability issue, whether it is housing prices, the rising cost of gas, a higher and higher percentage of their paycheques going to pay taxes. I think Conservatives have a unique opportunity to speak to people because we're not waking up every morning trying to raise payroll taxes, raise CPP fees, we're not trying to bring in a carbon tax. We're actually trying to find ways to lower costs for Canadians.

?I think there are a lot of people in Ottawa, and maybe universities, that support the carbon tax, but people don't. When I talk to people, [something resonates with them] is when I say we're going to repeal the carbon tax the Federal government is imposing.? This, he says, always receives a very positive response ? particularly in a world where ?the Liberals play very divisive politics, a lot of identity politics, pitting one group of Canadians off against the other.?

?When I say things like we need to live in a country that protects free speech, that treats every Canadian equally, I think people find that refreshing,? says Mr. Scheer. ?The negative way the Liberals do politics, we can't even ask questions about, say, people who fought for ISIS and return to Canada without being attacked for just posing that question. A lot of people are responding to the message; the theme we have been working with is putting people before government; that a lot of programs or policies are designed in Ottawa around a board room table, people who are very detached from the real world, and our policies speak directly to empowering people.?

While Mr. Scheer admits that the idea of a carbon tax, for instance, does resonate with some younger people, and indeed ?some middle aged people and older people,? he says he simply doesn't see a groundswell of support for such measures in this demographic.

?The environment in general is a higher concern for many young people than other age brackets, but that doesn't mean they necessarily support a carbon tax,? he says. ?They are looking for a credible plan on the environment. I will have a comprehensive plan; our party will have a lot to say about the environment, not just because it is a political requirement, but because we believe in it. I want to pass on a better environment to my kids.

?[The Liberal Government's] greenhouse gas emission targets is solely based on the carbon tax, it has not been proved to reduce emissions. I think we're going to have a lot of holes to poke in their plan and have something very credible to offer on our side.? Mr. Scheer also promises a credible plan to address homelessness.

The Federal Government announced a \$40 billion, 10-year plan for a National Housing Strategy last fall, which aims to cut homelessness by 50 per cent. The plan has seen some support, says Mr. Scheer, but a very important piece of the puzzle was missing.

? I think people want government to help be a partner in some of those solutions, but what they have promised, they have left half of it to be funded by the Provincial governments without any kind of agreements,? says Mr. Scheer. ?They announced the policy and only after that did they start working with the Provinces and municipalities to determine how to deliver that. That is not a very reasonable way to manage the Confederation.

?A much better approach would be to get them at the table first and launch a policy after you've got the buy-in. They are doing it exactly backwards, which always has worse results. The Liberals are very good at getting the announcement right but doing nothing on the follow-up. Our government wants to make [purchasing] a home easier; the Liberals have made it harder. We believe when it comes to homelessness there are other issues around mental health and addictions that have to be part of the conversation as well. It is not just physical structures, it is why people find themselves on the street. That has to be addressed as well.?