

Finance Minister meets with business leaders at Chamber Breakfast



By Brock Weir

Canada will have a Federal Election this year and Finance Minister Bill Morneau stated his case for the Liberal Government at a breakfast hosted last Tuesday by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce.

Interviewed before an audience by Stewart McLaren of Almac and McLaren Doors on stage at the Royal Venetian Mansion, Mr. Morneau fielded questions on a wide variety of topics, including trade and competitiveness.

‘It is worth stepping back and thinking about the last time Canadians needed to make a choice on a new government [in] 2015,’ said Mr. Morneau. ‘We had at that time had two quarters of negative growth, which is the definition of a recession. We had 7.1 per cent unemployment in this country. There were some real challenges.’

The Liberal Party, he said, offered a solution when the ‘economy was challenged’ and that was being ‘optimistic about the future of Canada, we should be investing in tomorrow, and making sure people had a sense of opportunity for themselves and their families.’ This translated into choosing investments over austerity and, he argued, resulted in dividends, but the last couple of years have presented some new challenges for the country, particularly when it comes to international trade with Canada’s largest trading partner, the United States.

‘We have seen some tumultuous things internationally with trade between the US and China causing a lot of anxiety, of course, and particularly difficult diplomatically right now,’ said Mr. Morneau. ‘People are feeling anxious. They are looking around the world and they are recognizing that it is moving faster than it ever has. The Prime Minister had an interesting quote and he said, the economy is moving faster than it ever has before, but it is slower than it ever will be in the future. It gives a sense of how rapidly things are changing in our world.’

‘I know in this room there are business owners who are worried about the cost of doing business, whether or not they will be able to face up to those challenges. We know people are worried about their ability to retire; they are worried about places like the GTA [and] affordable housing. We have many things that are causing that high anxiety.’

Key to addressing those issues is having a plan, something he said the Liberals are in best position to provide. Canadians want a ‘Real and concrete plan’ to deal with changes that are having a direct impact on our economy, our world, and our daily lives, and ‘a plan is a first step.’

‘You wouldn’t expect any business owner in this room to try [and go to a loan officer] without a plan for how they are going to grow their business,’ he said. ‘You wouldn’t go in for surgery without expecting that surgeon had a careful and concrete plan to make sure they will bring you out of that surgery successfully, and it is no less for us who are trying to make sure that our economy works in the long term.’

To this end, Mr. Morneau took direct aim at Premier Doug Ford who started the week with a speech saying that carbon pricing would be an economic failure. Mr. Morneau countered with criticism that the Ontario Government’s cutting of benefits for ‘those people that are most challenged in our society’ is ‘certainly not a plan.’

Making statements like Mr. Ford’s, he said, were ‘potentially destabilizing’ with the potential of ‘causing real harm to Canadians,

real harm to their jobs and their potential jobs in the future.

“Federally, when the Conservative opposition says they have a plan for Climate Change, in my estimation it is incumbent upon them to tell us what that plan is,” he said. “We need to be able to debate and understand whether it is actually going to have the long-term impact we know we need to have. If there is a plan and they are not telling people, presumably they are assuming that people don't have the capacity to understand. I would say that, together, we need to recognize that facing up to these challenges is critically important.”

Looking ahead, Mr. Morneau said the Liberal Government has made significant changes in reducing taxes for middle class Canadians, reducing the tax bracket for individuals making between \$45,000 and \$90,000 by seven per cent, retooling the Canada Child Benefit to better benefit families in greater need, and focusing on improving transit with Regional governments.

“We know there is a continuing sense of anxiety,” he said. “We know that there is still more to do, but let's look at what's happening: over the last three-and-a-half-years, Canadians have created 800,000 new jobs, but there is still more to do. We know that after the last few years, we have seen our unemployment rate go down from that high 7.1 down to 5.6 per cent. We currently have the lowest rate of unemployment we have seen since the mid-1970s, but we know there's still more to do. We know that our plan, the plan of being optimistic, about investing in Canadians and doing it in a way that is balanced and measured is the right way to go. That's the plan we've created, it's working for Canada.”

Individuals attending the breakfast, however, wanted more and emcee Mr. McLaren and individuals peppered the Minister with questions, many of which had to do with trade and the cost of doing business.

The new trade deal between Canada, the United States and Mexico was under the microscope, particularly when it came to lingering tariffs levied by the U.S. government on steel and aluminum.

Mr. Morneau said the Government was working “on a very regular basis” to address the tariff situation.

Business owners also approached him with concerns about the perceived negative impacts climate change policies might have on businesses, and possible alternatives.

One such alternative proposed to the Minister was the creation of a system of credits to incentivize businesses to reduce packaging and divert materials away from landfill.

“We're not trying to say that the only thing we should do is put a price on pollution,” said the Finance Minister. “We're facing a real challenge and that challenge had got many, many aspects to it. Pricing pollution is the thing that is an essential way to get at this issue so we have a long-term impact, [but] I will take that idea away.”