

Pro-life groups say Scheer paid price for weak leadership

Pro-life and social conservative groups are disputing the narrative that has formed around Andrew Scheer's decision to step down as federal Conservative Party leader.

Campaign Life Coalition (CLC) and Right Now claim his decision not to champion his personal values as a practising Catholic on issues such as abortion and gay rights cost him more with voters than his critics in the media and within the Conservative Party will understand.

And they are quick to make it known that they will try to influence the race within the Conservative Party to replace Scheer, now that the party will have to find a new leader.

"(Campaign Life Coalition) looks forward to encouraging its supporters to get involved in the Conservative Party leadership race, whenever that may occur," a statement from the CLC said soon after Scheer announced on Dec. 12 that he was stepping down as Conservative leader.

"In 2017, more than 11,000 CLC supporters became party members during the leadership race. We hope to build on that impact in the campaign if there is a proudly pro-life, pro-family champion who runs for leadership," the CLC statement said.

The CLC's analysis of the Oct. 21 federal election results, in which the Conservatives remained the official Opposition in a minority Parliament in which the Liberals maintained power and parties with so-called "progressive" viewpoints on social issues such as the Liberals, Bloc Quebecois and NDP garnered more than 60 per cent of the votes, is at odds with much of the post-election analysis.

Within the media and even within some factions of the Conservative Party, Scheer's personal opinions on social issues, especially when it comes to gay marriage and gay rights, is cited as a key factor in a Scheer-led Conservative Party's failure to win more seats in the Greater Toronto area and Quebec.

Former federal Conservative cabinet minister Peter MacKay, who has acknowledged he is considering running for the leadership, even went so far as to call Scheer's personal views an "albatross" around the party's neck in the federal campaign, although he quickly backed away from that statement.

Groups within the Conservative Party that called for Scheer's resignation soon after the federal election have continually raised Scheer's views on social issues, especially when it comes to issues such as his refusal to walk in Gay

Pride parades, as being out of step with modern Canadian society.

The CLC's national president, Jeff Gunnarson, said Scheer's unwillingness to take a strong pro-life position on the campaign trail and his promise that as leader of the party he would not reopen divisive debates in the House of Commons on issues such as abortion and gay rights regardless of his personal views was a betrayal of many voters who would have supported him.

"While many in the media say that the Conservatives were limited to their base, we believe that many more pro-life, pro-family and religious Canadians would have voted Conservative if the leader and party gave them a real reason to, other than the fact they were not Justin Trudeau," Gunnarson said.

"Scheer's poorly articulated and clearly uncomfortable position of claiming to be personally pro-life while vowing to not touch the issue upset his socially conservative base, confused many people, and was seen as disingenuous."

It is an analysis of the election results shared, to a certain extent, by another pro-life group Right Now.

Right Now, which advocates for more pro-life MPs and campaigns on their behalf, said that the results of the Oct. 21 federal election were actually positive for pro-life advocates.

"Some political pundits, commentators and Conservative insiders think that Scheer has got to go because he was too socially conservative. They think the Conservatives need a leader that follows in Trudeau's footsteps on 'abortion and gay marriage'," an analysis of the election results prepared by Right Now's Alissa Golob and Scott Hayward.

"We know that your first instinct as pro-life voters would be frustration and anger about the fact that we are stuck with Justin Trudeau, arguably one of the most pro-abortion politicians in Canadian history, as Prime Minister of Canada," Golob and Hayward said, but added that according to Right Now pro-life candidates did very well on election night.

Right Now claimed that 52 of 53 pro-life MPs running for reelection won their seats and 15 of the 22 newly elected Conservative MPs identify themselves as pro-life.

"The House of Commons is now more pro-life than before, the Conservative Party of Canada caucus is more pro-life than before, and some of the staunchest pro-abortion Conservative female MPs have been replaced by younger, more diverse, pro-life Conservative female MPs," according to Right Now.

The view that Scheer's personal beliefs are out of step with members of the

Conservative Party and Canadian society as a whole, which is prevalent within the fiscal Conservative and old Red Tory factions within the party, is not only disputed by social conservative groups such as the CLC and Right Now, but also some of the party's critics as well.

Marc Lafrance, an associate sociology professor at Montreal's Concordia University, said in an op-ed published in *The Conversation* that Scheer's views on issues such as abortion and gay rights are supported by many within the party.

"Media commentators have suggested that if the Conservatives hope to win the next election, they must elect a leader who is capable of communicating a more convincingly centrist position on issues such as abortion and LGBTQ rights," Lafrance said.

"The commentators may well be correct, but their often exclusive focus on Scheer's political beliefs – rather than on those of his newly elected caucus members – gives the impression that the party's problem with social conservatism begins and ends with him," he said.

Instead, Lafrance said Scheer's viewpoints on contentious social issues is in line with many party members.

"While he may have lacked the strategic ability to keep his views from causing him problems on the campaign trail, Scheer's beliefs are not out of step with those of the party he represents," Lafrance said. "So if the party wants to shed the social conservatism label, it has to do more than just replace him. It has to completely transform itself."