

Grits hitting above their weight

The provincial Liberals may be small, but they're effective: Jones

BY STEVE BARTLETT sbartlett@thetelegram.com

THE TELEGRAM

It may be small and resource-challenged, but the provincial Liberal caucus feels it's performing well and has surpassed expectations. "We're on top of more issues, we're better prepared, and I think that we are much more effective than most that I have ever seen," party leader Yvonne Jones says. "If we had more resources, if we had more bodies in the benches, if we had more staff, we could double that effort and we could be double that effective."

Jones and caucus mates Kelvin Parsons and Roland Butler gauge their effectiveness by media coverage, public feedback and government

Parsons says a sign of their success was when the House management commission's Tory members denied them a recommended \$162,000 funding increase last fall.

"That's a good tell-tale to me that we were doing our job," he says.

Jones also says the government's reaction in the House also shows the Liberals are making inroads.

"For example, when you look at the last budget, you'll see their investments are in areas like home care, mental health services, youth addictions services, hospital infrastructure, student debt. ... I mean, we have constantly raised and pounded those issues on the floor of the House of Assembly for the last 12 months," she says.

Williams himself has given props to the opposition, which includes the Liberals and Lorraine Michael of the New Democratic Party.

In a Telegram story earlier this year, he said they do a better job at holding government accountable than the dozen opposition members who sat on the other side before the 2007 election.

"It's an effective opposition down there," he said. "They're bright, capable people who are wellresearched ... and ask the difficult questions. And that makes us a better government."

Amanda Bittner, an assistant professor of political science at Memorial University, is impressed with Jones and crew, especially given that they are few in number.

"That's quite the challenge, isn't it? Generally speaking, one would assume for an opposition party to have only three members and to actually get things done is next to impossible because of a lack of resources. But I would say, actually, (Jones) is doing quite well."

Alex Marland, also an assistant political science prof at MUN, says in politics if there are low expectations and a party overperforms, people often view it favourably.

"So I would say the Liberals are benefiting from extremely low expectations and so, as a result, they are doing fairly well in the sense they seem to be keeping the government to account."

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— Photo by Steve Bartlett/The Telegram



When the House of Assembly is in session, the Liberal caucus and its 10-person staff meet at least twice before question period.

Marland adds that politics is measured by public opinion polls and popularity, and in those areas, the Liberals are still way behind. (Williams was at 79 per cent in the latest poll, while his party was at 71. That's compared to Jones' 11 per cent and her party's 22 per cent.)

"It's one thing for her to say she is doing well in the House, which a lot of people would say she is, but is that actually translating into success in the opinion polls? And I don't think the answer is yes," Marland says.

But Jones notes the Grits have seen popular support improve modestly in every poll.

"Small, marginal, but we've went up," she says. " We have not gone down, and we are higher than we have been since 2004. It's a little indication that there is some support out there that wasn't there a year-and-a-half or two years ago. Is it where we want to be? Of course it isn't." Marland says he thinks Williams is a populist. For the Liberals to improve, he suggests they take that into account and devise a strategy.

" They should read what populism involves and then figure out what are the strengths and weaknesses of populism and then go after things in a thematic manner."