



Liberal Leader Yvonne Jones sits in her office reviewing a newspaper story involving her constituency. It is among the dozens of issues she would discuss during this hectic day. - Photo by Steve Bartlett/The Telegram

Yvonne Jones is on her feet, declaring the government has failed to deal with the problems at Eastern Health.

She weighs in on a figurative comment Premier Danny Williams made the day before: that officials at the embattled health authority "should be shot" over a recent communications fiasco.

She says his choice of words reflects an aggressive approach, yet the province has been nonchalant when it comes to

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addressing the problems.

She speaks for 14 minutes, raising other issues, too, such as the plight of five workers she says are in limbo because of the government's expropriation of Abitibi-Bowater assets.

She is animated, using quick hand gestures to emphasize her points.

But she isn't in the House of Assembly.

She's in her office with the phone to her ear, talking on an open-line radio show.

Spend a day with Jones and observe what is arguably one of Canada's toughest political jobs - leading the three-person official Opposition against the popularity and power of Williams and his 44-member government.

Jones and her team go flat-out, maintaining a pace and schedule most people outside politics don't realize or consider.

It's 10:34 a.m. when the call ends, and Jones returns to the caucus meeting she left to phone "Open Line" host Randy Simms.

Her Liberal colleagues - Kelvin Parsons and Roland Butler - are preparing for the afternoon's question period with some of the party's 10 staffers.

No reporters are allowed at the brainstorming session.

Some topics are sensitive, plus the Liberals don't want to leak any fuel they will use to hold government's feet to the fire.

Jones' fifth-floor office, where a Telegram reporter waits, is spacious and tidy, filled with binders, cabinets and file organizers.

The walls are a soft golden beige, decorated with, among other things, the massive certificate she signed to become fisheries minister during better Liberal times, and a framed magazine cover. Its headline: "Voisey's Bay: A deal set in stone."

There are shelves - one holds a book on crop circles - leather chairs and couch, and two TVs she uses to watch supperhour newscasts.

Her large desk is neat and holds a stack of newspapers and a vase of daffodils.

Perhaps the most symbolic thing in Jones' office today is something she likely doesn't realize is there - a penny on the floor a few feet from the entrance.

The coin is fitting because a lack of finances is a huge challenge for the Liberals. Party members say it prevents the Grits from having more resources and doing a better job.

Jones returns to her office after 30 minutes or so, and leaves messages with contacts in Labrador West, since an extended summer shutdown at the Iron Ore Company of Canada is among the issues she might raise during Question Period.

They always confirm their information before bringing it up in the House, she explains.

Bonnie Hicks, her longtime constituency assistant, is waiting to discuss matters in Cartwright-L'Anse Au Clair.

Jones, who was elected in Labrador as an independent in 1996, gets roughly 30 calls a day from the district.

She sits in a chair across from Hicks and they run through a list of items constituents have called about - multi-grade classrooms, bridge repairs, employment insurance appeals.

In mid-conversation, Jones' answers a call on her BlackBerry.

"She always answers her phone," Hicks whispers.

It's Canadian Blood Services asking the O-positive Jones to give.

The constituency conversation continues, but is again interrupted by a ringing BlackBerry.

It's a Labrador West source and they discuss IOC.

She and Hicks finish up and, at 12:30 p.m. the caucus reconvenes in the board room to review Question Period topics.

The intent is to ensure questions are hard-hitting and convey effective messages.

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Jones eats stirfry she made the night before. She says she often eats three meals at work, that sometimes supper consists of cheese and crackers.

An hour after the meeting, Jones, Butler and Parsons are in the House.

The Tories take up three rows across the floor and more government members are to the left.

The New Democratic Party's Lorraine Michael is to the right.

Following statements from members and ministers, Jones stands and directs the Opposition's first question at Health Minister Ross Wiseman.

It's about how Eastern Health had known since March 26 that more patients were affected by the hormone receptor testing scandal but failed to release the information until April 3.

"The minister says that he was told on April 1, and he introduced it to cabinet the next day," Jones says.

"I ask the minister: why did Eastern Health wait so long to bring the information to your attention, and why did it have to go through cabinet before direction was given to disclose it?"

She is heckled from across the floor.

Wiseman counters that it is natural to update cabinet whenever there is a significant development. He says there were discussions with Eastern Health about public disclosure following that.

Jones presses Wiseman, asking five more questions on the issue.

The taunts - with John Hickey making most of them - intensify to the point that it is hard to hear her.

The most frequent brickbat is about Jones' recent hiring of former Liberal cabinet member Joan-Marie Aylward as her policy advisor.

Jones plows on and asks about the premier's "They should be shot" comment and about the resignation of a nurse practitioner at the HIV/AIDS clinic.

She questions Innovation Minister Shawn Skinner about Abitibi-Bowater employees.

During the exchange, Jones has to speak louder to be heard over the hecklers.

That prompts Skinner to say, "Mr. Speaker, there is no need for the Opposition leader to yell at me. I can hear her quite normally, and I will be happy to respond to her without her yelling at me."

He goes on to say the province and union felt the employee concerns were Abitibi-Bowater obligations.

Jones replies, and lands in hot water.

"Minister, I apologize for raising my voice, but I cannot talk gently and rise above the yahoos in the backbenches over there, because they have been bawling and screaming since I have been on my feet, Mr. Speaker."

That draws further jeers from government members.

The exchange between Jones and Skinner continues, before Parsons asks a question and then Michael closes Question Period.

Once the session ends, Speaker Roger Fitzgerald scolds Jones.

"I say to the Honourable Leader of the Opposition that is certainly unparliamentary, and I ask her if she would withdraw those remarks immediately," he says.

Jones does.

It's been a busy 30 minutes. Today, she has been the Opposition's quiz master.

She figures she averages between 10 and 15 questions per Question Period.

Jones says the Liberals try to ignore the heckling because they don't have time to lose focus.

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"I looked at it last year and there were at least 10 backbenchers in the government that never spoke on one bill for the whole session," she says later. "They have lots of time to heckle. They have lots of time to come up with all the smart comments and to throw them back and forth across the House, whereas our time is better spent doing the work we need to do."

On this day, even though Question Period is history, Jones has a lot more to do on the House floor.

She presents a petition on behalf of Cartwright-L'Anse au Clair, asking government to consider lifting the annual price freeze on petroleum products in the area.

Minutes later, she rises again for a response in debate and, apart from a few interruptions from government MHAs, speaks for an hour on the budget.

She talks about restoring confidence in the health system and the implementation of the Cameron Inquiry recommendations.

She also revisits the PR debacle at Eastern Health and the plight of the Abitibi-Bowater workers.

She says later that preparation and passion are key to speaking for an hour.

"If I don't have that passion, if I don't care enough to find the information, I'm not going to do justice to that issue," she observes.

"Some might say, 'You don't do justice to the issue anyway,' but I can tell you more days than not, I get tonnes of e-mails from people in the province that just say, 'Thank you for raising that issue.'"

It's 3:45 p.m., and Jones' workday will last a lot longer.

She does a wide-ranging interview with The Telegram about her frantic schedule, heavy workload and her future (see page A4).

During the interview she gets a note indicating that federal Liberal MP Gerald Kennedy is in town and wants to meet with her.

She will do that and then spend an hour on a conference call regarding a fundraiser for a women's shelter in Happy Valley - Goose Bay.

At 7 p.m., she will head back to the House for a health estimates meeting that will see Wiseman questioned, line by line, on the health funding allotted in the provincial budget - a process expected to take three hours.

(Such meetings are held for every government department and Jones, Butler or Parsons attends every one of them.)

Jones says after the meeting she'll go home and take a bath before hitting the hay.

"Come 10, 11 o'clock tonight I will be mentally exhausted and I will need the sleep," she says. "But I can guarantee you 6 a.m. tomorrow morning I will be up and rarin' to go."

She is usually at work by 8 a.m. and says 12 or 14-hour days are common for the Liberals and their staff while the House is sitting.

It's almost as busy when the legislature is closed, Jones notes, because that's when the party does a lot of its research.

She quips that she'd like to go to a movie sometime and notes that her husband is obviously very patient.

But she also feels all the effort is paying off (see page A4) and the long days for all of them are worth it.

"The satisfaction is really in seeing some accomplishment for the work you do, being able to help somebody. And I know every day I'm helping someone, whether it is directly by getting them into a hospital or getting them on a medivac, or getting their benefits sorted out for them over the phone with Canada Pension. Or whether it is standing in the legislature and advocating for a policy change, knowing that if I do it long enough, hard enough and (aggressively) enough, someone is going to listen and someone is going to act."

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