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## Good year for the Liberals

### Rebuilding party, 'plight' of rural N.L. on Jones' 2009 list

BY DAVE BARTLETT  
THE TELEGRAM

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— Photo by Joe Gibbons/The Telegram



*Liberal Leader Yvonne Jones says 2009 was a good year for the province and for her party. She's looking ahead to another good year for both in 2010.*

Yvonne Jones says 2009 was a good year for both the province and the Newfoundland and Labrador Liberal Party as it rebuilds its finances and political clout.

But during her year-end interview with The Telegram, Jones kept returning to a theme the Liberals used during the last provincial election — that rural parts of the province are being left behind.

"I think it has been a very good year for the province, only because there's been more disposable income, as a government to spend," Jones said. "However, in terms of how that income is felt in different communities and by different families, obviously varies."

She said the message she's hearing from many rural communities is that things are getting tougher, not easier.

#### Rebuilding the party

The provincial Liberal party held its annual convention in Gander in May.

Delegates spoke optimistically about the party's future as it recovered from the crushing defeat of the 2007 election, which reduced the party to three seats in the House of Assembly.

Jones said the party rode the momentum from that convention throughout the rest of the year.

"We've made some significant progress in the last year," she said. "Obviously, the highlight for us was winning (another) seat in a byelection.

Marshall Dean won The StraitsWhite Bay North in October, after former transportation minister Trevor Taylor resigned.

"We won the seat at a time when government was (at a popularity rate of) 77 per cent in the polls in the province," Jones added.

"I think the fact that we won the seat in a rural area against those kinds of odds ... simply speaks to the fact not enough is being done in rural areas."

Though the Liberals didn't win a second byelection in Terra Nova a month later, Jones said the results in that district were also a victory of sorts.

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## Highs and lows of 2009

*dbartlett@thetelegram.com*

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In the 2007 election, she said her party won 17 per cent of the popular vote in Terra Nova, but increased its showing to 38 per cent this time around — something she calls a “massive accomplishment.”

Behind the scenes, Jones said the party also had success, forming new committees, reinvigorating district associations and electing a new provincial executive.

She said fundraising and donations are up and the party is paying down its manageable debt.

“We were able to go out, and without blinking an eye, be able to run (in) these byelections which is something we would not have been able to do (financially) a couple of years ago,” she said.

Jones told The Telegram she will seek to lead the party on a full-time basis when it holds a leadership convention in Oct. 2010.

She’s been interim leader for the last two years.

### High points

Considering the global economic downturn of the past year, Jones said the province has done well.

“For the most part, I think we were able to maintain a good level of stability from an economic perspective,” she said.

She listed a number of economic positives, including expansions in the oil and gas industry, new mining projects, and natural gas exploration off the coast of Labrador.

She’s also happy work has begun on the new nickel processing plant in Long Harbour, which will eventually process ore from Voisey’s Bay.

Beyond the good economic news, Jones was also pleased to see a financial settlement announced for victims of the

breast cancer testing scandal, and a government budget commitment on an issue the Liberals highlighted in the House early in the year.

“I was very pleased, as well, to see government agree to move forward with a new youth treatment facility for young people suffering from mental illness,” she said.

The opening of the Trans-Labrador Highway between Cartwright and Happy Valley-Goose Bay was also high on her list, as the road now connects her own district of Cartwright-L’Anse Au Clair with central Labrador.

“This is history in the making,” Jones said. “Going back to 1996 when I was first elected as an MHA, I travelled by snowmobile in that election in the month of February from Red Bay in one end of my district to Cartwright in the other end.”

Today she can drive to all but three of the communities in her district.

### Tragedy and loss

Even though the province weathered the economic storm pretty well, the past year wasn’t without disappointment and disaster, Jones noted.

She called last March’s Cougar helicopter crash offshore — which claimed the lives of 17 people — “one of the greatest tragedies to hit this province in a very long time.”



*Liberal Leader Yvonne Jones*

She was also saddened by the number of women who died after receiving inaccurate test results during the breast cancer testing scandal.

It wasn’t all roses economically, either.

“The fact that we had another pulp

and paper mill close in the province this year, the fact that our unemployment rate is continuing to climb to record levels ... those things cause me tremendous concern,” Jones said.

And then there’s the proposed Lower Churchill hydroelectric project.

“The whole fiasco around the Lower Churchill has been, in my opinion, one of the lowest points in the past year,” she said.

Jones said government has had six years to get a project underway, but it’s “a lot further away from reality than it was three years ago.”

“Danny Williams was probably one of the few premiers that we’ve seen in our history who’s had the ability to do a deal and actually sell it to people,” she said.

“I’m not convinced he has the ability to do a deal at all at this point.”

Meanwhile, Jones said, other provinces are getting ahead of Newfoundland and Labrador when it comes to energy development.

### Rural communities

Jones says her biggest disappointment is the government’s record in rural areas.

“There is very little recognition (of) the plight of the people in these communities,” she said.

Jones travelled to many rural communities in the last year, and she said the message was always the same.

“I walked up to too many doors where people have no jobs, where they’re depending upon a social service system that has become ancient in terms of the benefits it pays out to people,” she said.

Jones said the government likes to talk about the millions spent on roads, water and sewer projects and other rural infrastructure.

But she said many of the small towns can’t even afford to come up with their 10 per cent share of projects due to shrinking populations and tax bases. Jones said some towns are operating on a budget of less than \$100,000 a year.

Proposed cuts to laboratory and X-ray services in Flower’s Cove and Lewisporte also ruffled Jones’ feathers.

"That was a real low point in this province, when government decided to gut rural health care," she said. "The fact they reversed their decision is a good thing, but where's the agenda for all this?"

Jones also takes issue with those who ask why people stay in small communities.

"It's their home," Jones said. "These communities were not built by governments. Most rural communities in this province were built by people ... with their own hands, through small amounts of money, through donating free labour."

She said communities often came together to saw local lumber to build churches, schools, community centres and fire halls.

"That's why this attachment exists in rural Newfoundland and Labrador that you don't often find in larger centres."

Letter grade for government

When The Telegram asked Jones to grade the government, she said the mark would depend on the issue.

She gave the Williams administration top marks for reforming the Department of Health to create the Department of Child Youth and Family services.

She's also glad the province has continued to freeze tuition at Memorial University, plans to expand residences at post-secondary institutions, and has eliminated interest on the provincial portion of student loans.

She said healthy children and an educated society will equal a positive future.

And Jones credits the government with business development in spite of the recession.

But she gives the province poor grades when it comes to the fishery, which she said sustains hundreds of rural communities, but gets little attention from the government.

"Unless there's a protest at the head of a wharf or over on the steps of the fisheries building, it's never talked about, it's never dealt with," Jones said.

She said while the government invests in mining, forestry and oil and gas, she asks "where's the investment in the fishing industry?"

Looking forward

Jones said while differences will always exist between Ottawa and the provinces, she hopes differences between the federal and provincial governments will be smoothed over in the new year.

"I'd like to see our relationship with the federal government improve," she said.

"We have missed great opportunities in the last year because of a weak relationship with the federal government."

Jones said those opportunities include major infrastructure projects, work to protect Canada's arctic sovereignty and the Atlantic gateway project.

She'd like the province and Ottawa agree to pave the entire Trans-Labrador Highway in the next six or eight years.

She'd also like to see a renewed interest by the province in a fixed link across the Strait of Belle Isle.

"I believe that the fixed link between (the island) and Labrador is going to be critical to economic progress in this province in the long term," Jones said.

Health care will remain a priority for the Liberals in the coming year, she said, adding she gets more calls about health care than any other issue.

While the province continues to buy and upgrade equipment, she said it still has a problem with human resources in the health-care sector.

Jones said the government should also put more emphasis on strengthening rural health care instead of "looking for ways to dismantle it."