

# NEWS

Last updated at 10:07 AM on 28/10/08

## Laying off Liberals

Party leader calls caucus resource decision unfair and gutless

**PAM MORRISSEY**

The Aurora

The provincial Liberal Party leader feels the Danny Williams administration is on a power trip.

Yvonne Jones, MHA for Cartwright-L'Anse au Clair, responded to recent the House of Assembly Management Commission decision to reject a \$150,000 increase in caucus resources for the Liberal Party, in a telephone interview with the Aurora last week, saying the move shows the Premier will stop at nothing to get absolute power.

"For a long time, most people out there in the public have been very quiet when it comes to decisions of this government, but we, as an Opposition, have been one of the ones who've taken up the role of advocating on behalf of people and putting forward their views," she explained. "I guess they've gotten a little tired of that approach and are looking for a way to silence us and make us go away."

She stresses the Official Opposition will not back down, even with limited resources, and said the governing party may try to hinder the Liberal Party, but it doesn't have the ability to shut down the office – that can only happen if mandated by the people.

On Oct. 15, the House of Assembly Management Commission met and discussed the recommendations of an independent study on the levels of expenses for each of the caucuses in the House.

According to the provincial press release, following the last provincial election, all parties agreed the Liberal and NDP caucuses would receive an additional \$100,000 in base funding, which they received.

Joan Burke, Minister of Education and Government House Leader, said base funding for caucuses should be equal, but since the government caucus didn't receive additional funding after the provincial election, it should get it now.

The commission decided to increase the government caucus budget by \$125,000 and the Liberal caucus budget by \$11,600. The breakdown for all three parties now, she said, includes \$593,000 for the Progressive Conservative caucus (44 members), \$456,600 for the Liberal caucus (three members) and \$244,800 for the NDP caucus (one member).

"When you look at the number of caucus members for each party and the corresponding allocation of monies, it is clear that the Liberal Party is most certainly not being disadvantaged," she said. "For Ms. Jones to complain about lack of funding is extremely unwarranted. The days of excess in the House of Assembly are over."

However, Ms. Jones said the government's position is weak.

When Danny Williams was the Opposition leader in 2003, Ms. Jones noted he ran the office with a budget of nearly \$670,000 (pro-rated), and government members at the same time were running their offices with less than \$200,000 than government today.

And, she said, the size of the caucus doesn't matter – the office of the Official Opposition has to perform certain duties and those are the same whether the caucus is small or large.

"Every day we have legislative obligations to review and debate every piece of legislation that comes through the House of Assembly, to pose questions to the government to be able to participate in the debate on resolutions and private members motions within the House of Assembly, and to also advocate on behalf of the public on issues of concern," she stated. "That job does not change whether there's three members or 23 members. In fact, the fewer members there are in a caucus, increases the pressure that is required for research staff and other responsibilities for policy and legislative research. What they did was wrong, unfair, political, very biased and intentional on their behalf to limit our ability to be able to do the job we're mandated with under a democracy."

Ms. Jones said the Liberal Party has been getting a lot of support from the public since the results of the commission meeting were made public, and are even volunteering to help read through legislation to help the Official Opposition do its job.

She said it isn't fair for government to be putting such a burden on the Liberal Party, and she wishes government members would accept the recommendations put forward by the independent consultant and provide the party with an additional \$150,000.

She'd also like to see the core funding increased from the current \$100,000.

"It's absolutely terrible that they can look and say we're going to give every party caucus \$100,000 core budget right across the board when in other provinces, where there are equal core budgets, those budgets are all over \$300,000 a year," she explained. "In Nova Scotia, the Opposition office there is operating at about \$1.2 million."



File photo/Official Opposition leader Yvonne Jones says if the House of Assembly Management Commission decision to reject a \$150,000 increase in caucus resources for the Liberal Party stands, it will result in the layoff of at least three Liberal staff members, which in turn will effect the way the Opposition operates.

According to Ms. Jones, when the House of Assembly Management Commission reconvenes Nov. 13 to make its final decision on the caucus funding, if the current allocation holds, the Liberal Party is going to have to lay off at least three staff members.

In turn, she noted, the number of files the Opposition can work on will decrease, which means there will be issues in the province the Liberal Party won't be able to work on.

"We will have to be more selective with the issues we take on and the profile we give to them and there will be others that get left behind because we don't have the staff or resources to investigate it properly," she said. "It's very unfair. It's the most political, manipulative approach I've ever seen a government take in a very long time. It is low and it is gutless, in my opinion."

Ms. Jones said now that the provincial PCs have made up with the federal Conservatives, it appears the PC members have set their sights on making the Liberals their enemy, in order to unite a party that was fractured after the ABC campaign. She admits it will be hard for the Opposition to do its job in the current climate, but the party will still fight for people in the province to the best of its ability while maintaining its integrity.

"It's going to be tough, no doubt about it," she said. "We'll focus on the issues, we'll focus on the debates, but we certainly won't be getting into the gutter-style politics that we've seen from this government. We're going to take the high road.

Unfortunately, we're in a position where we don't have a trump card to play. Government has stolen the whole deck of cards and taken off with them. We're in the game, but right now they have all the cards, they have all the chips, and we're limited in the moves we can make."