

Opposition warms up for new session

Calls for legislation on whistle-blowing, replacement workers, snow tires

BY NADYA BELL
THE TELEGRAM



Yvonne Jones



Lorraine Michael

Opposition members in the House of Assembly may be few, but they say they're ready for debate. After a nine-month recess, three Liberals, one NDPer and 44 Progressive Conservatives will go back at it Monday to review new legislation and pass a provincial budget. Government House Leader Tom Rideout will read the list of new legislation up for debate. He deflected advance questions from The Telegram.

Opposition party leaders say they hope for legislation to protect whistle-blowers in government, restrict the use of replacement workers during strikes and make snow tires mandatory across the province.

Liberal Opposition Leader Yvonne Jones says her party may have few MFAs, but it will still hold the government accountable.

"Obviously, government has a very visible presence in the House of Assembly," she said. "They're going to carry a lot of weight in terms of numbers, but we expect to carry a lot of weight in terms of issues that we will be bringing forward."

"Government has had a great honeymoon from the House of Assembly."

Jones said House-watchers might notice a change in decorum this session, with the Liberals less concerned about debating for the sake of gaining political points.

She said one item of legislation the Williams administration should introduce is a mandatory requirement for winter tires.

NDP Leader Lorraine Michael says she will push for the whistle-blowing legislation the premier promised during last fall's election campaign.

"Based on the numbers of people I still have coming to me from the health-care system, privately and secretly, I really do think we need protection for them to be able to speak out," Michael said.

She also wants to see legislation limiting the use of replacement workers during strikes.

"A strike is a recognized right in our society and the employer should not be able to use replacement workers," she said.

"We have coverage for when we have essential services in collective agreements. If it's not an essential service, there should be no replacement workers. It takes away the one tool that the workers have in negotiating."

Debate on the 2008 provincial budget will take up a large portion of the spring House session, says Finance Minister Tom Marshall. He expects the budget to be released at the end of March or in early April.

"There are also other things like interim supply and any tax bills that come out of the budget, so I'm quite busy when there is a new session," Marshall said.

The NDP leader also said many groups have suggested to her that the increase in minimum wage be fast-tracked in the provincial budget.

The Liberals, meanwhile, say they'll question the government on their agreement with industry partners on the Hebron-Ben Nevis deal and the provincial energy plan.

Jones said her party will also press for better health equipment in the budget.

She said the Health Sciences Centre in St. John's is lagging behind other Canadian hospitals and needs a PET scanner and cyclotron body-scanning system for the diagnosis of cancer, neurological diseases, cardiac

diseases and Parkinson's.

Jones said the province should also update digital mammography equipment for detecting breast cancer at 12 hospitals.

Recycling and garbage programs also need to be improved, she said.

"We need them to move on the waste-management program for the province. They've been five years dragging their heels doing consultations, trying to push waste management into regions of the province where it just does not fit, and we want them to get on with it," she said.

She also wants more information about what the environmental implications are of several projects planned for Placentia Bay, including a nickel processing plant in Long Harbour and an oil refinery in Southern Head.

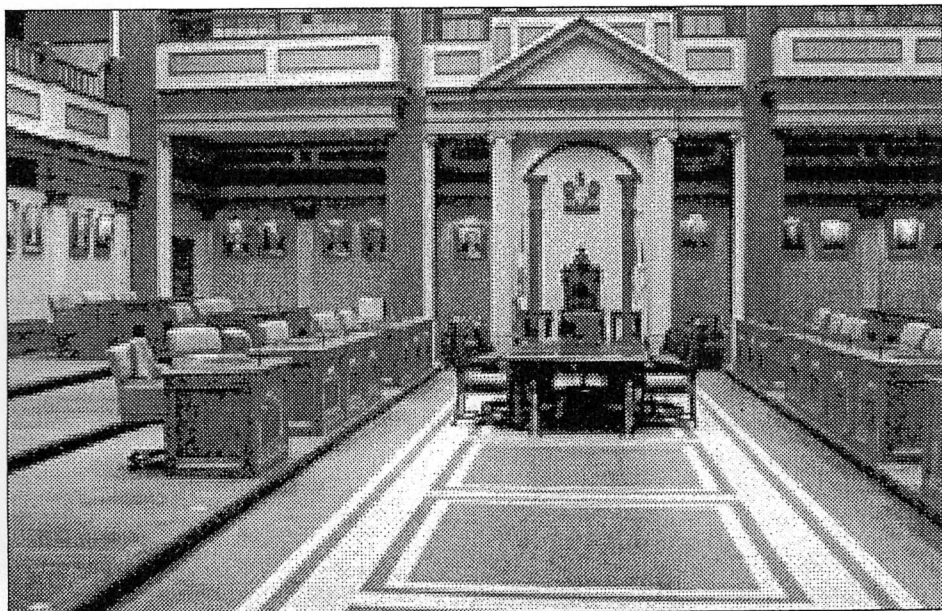
And she said legal aid, mental-health services and addictions counselling need to be improved outside larger centres, as well as more affordable housing for industrially productive towns such as Labrador City-Wabush.

"If you just look at over the last couple of years, we've had a number of murder-suicides in various outport regions around the province, and a lot of that is stemming from the fact that people need services, whether it be counselling or psychological addiction services, but they're not getting it and it's not being provided," Jones says.

Michael added that health-care infrastructure and home care will be big on her party's agenda, as will environmental concerns and agriculture and land use.

"The whole issue of home care ... our home-care situation is abominable and I will continue to be looking to see if the government is showing any signs at all of understanding the need for a home-care system that is part of our public health-care system," she said.

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These seats will probably be occupied once again as the House of Assembly opens tomorrow for the first time since last fall's provincial election. The opposition benches to the left of the photo have been severely reduced in number from the last sitting.

— Photo by Gary Hebbard/The Telegram