

LOCAL NEWS

Last updated at 8:44 AM on 16/10/08

Tories torpedo cash for Liberals 🚢 PCs, NDP get full benefits recommended by report

ROB ANTLE
The Telegram

The Progressive Conservative members of the House of Assembly management commission have voted to block additional cash aimed at helping the Liberal Opposition hire researchers and caucus support staff — at least for now. The PCs did vote to give themselves more money, along with the NDP. Earlier this year, the legislature hired an independent consultant to review caucus resources for the province's three parties. The 2007 election saw the ruling Conservatives win 44 seats in the legislature, with the Liberals reduced to three and the NDP at one. Fewer opposition seats meant fewer resources to hire staff. The Liberals and NDP complained that the situation was unfair. The consultant — St. John's-based Metrics EFG Inc. — found that Saskatchewan politicians receive double the annual funding for core and research staff compared to this province. Nova Scotia's caucus funding level is triple the \$1 million currently allotted in Newfoundland and Labrador. "We concluded from our research that the funding for all three caucuses is not adequate to meet their research, policy and administrative needs," the consultant wrote. Those needs were largest in the official Opposition Liberal caucus, the consultant noted, while recommending additional research and office cash for all three parties — \$126,000 more for the government PC caucus, \$124,000 extra for the NDP, and \$162,000 more for the Liberals. The six members of the management commission voted unanimously to grant the Tories and NDP the full recommended benefits. But the three Conservative commission members — Trevor Taylor, Joan Burke and Elizabeth Marshall — voted to block almost all of the cash targeted to aid the Opposition Liberals. That vote ended in a 3-3 tie. House Speaker Roger Fitzgerald, a Conservative, declined to cast a deciding ballot, saying he would withhold his judgment on the "contentious issue" for now. "I'm not prepared with the knowledge that I have today, and the figures that I have in front of me, to cast a deciding vote," Fitzgerald said in the House. Instead of the recommended \$162,000, the Liberals instead received an extra \$12,000 in funding. Liberal Leader Yvonne Jones said the Opposition will be "stifled" because of a lack of resources. NDP Leader Lorraine Michael said she was "disturbed" by the decision. "I'm really shocked by what's happened ... I have not heard a logical explanation from the members who have voted against it, all of whom are members of the government," Michael told the House. But Conservative cabinet minister Trevor Taylor dismissed those concerns. "It's not fair for the opposition parties to characterize this in the manner they just did," he said in the legislature. "We just approved, as a result of going through the 17 recommendations that were there, we just approved an additional \$150,000 today in funding for the opposition to carry out their duties." Almost all of that cash went to the NDP. Jones was not mollified, saying in a press release that the management commission's decision is proof that "we are much closer to a dictatorship than the people of the province may think." Added the Liberal leader: "This is politics at its worst and simply not the actions that should be tolerated in a democracy, especially from a government that holds 44 out of 48 seats in the House of Assembly." Burke issued a news release later in the day, stating that the commission was doing what it's meant to do — scrutinize decisions regarding taxpayers' money going to MHAs. "The commission is not just a rubber stamp to hand out money to the opposition parties," she said in the release.

rantle@thetelegram.com

16/10/08