

Tories got more cash in 2003, Liberals say

PCs misleading public on caucus resources: Jones

By ROB ANTLE

THE TELEGRAM

The Opposition Liberals are firing another shot in the feud over funding for caucus staffing and research resources at the legislature.

Liberal Leader Yvonne Jones is pointing to figures released by the House of Assembly this week as proof the Tories received \$100,000 more to hire staff in the Opposition office five years ago than the Liberals get today.

"I listened to the premier's comments this weekend and read Joan Burke's comments today and it certainly demonstrates that this government has no problem putting out false information in an attempt to gain public support," Jones said in a statement issued Tuesday.

According to the figures released by the Liberals, the Tory Opposition had a budget of nearly \$550,000 for office staff in 2003, not including constituency assistants for MHAs.

The Liberals say that subsequent pay raises would have put that number over \$650,000 today.

The current budget for the Opposition Liberal office is roughly \$456,000.

An independent consultant recommended bumping that amount up to \$606,000. But the Tory members of the House of Assembly management commission voted last week to block that additional funding for the Liberals.

The Conservatives did vote to give themselves an additional \$126,000, and the NDP an extra \$124,000.

House Speaker Roger Fitzgerald, a Conservative who does not sit in the party's caucus, is expected to cast the deciding vote on the issue next month.

Jones said the Opposition is being "stifled" by the decision, and will be forced to lay off staffers.

NDP Leader Lorraine Michael said she was "disturbed" by the Tory move to torpedo Liberal funding.

But the governing Conservatives are defending the action.

Tory cabinet minister Joan Burke wrote in a letter published Tuesday in The Telegram that "there is not an endless pot of money for the Liberal party."

And Premier Danny Williams said this week that he has some "grave concerns" about the Liberals' complaints.

"They have more than enough in resources in order to, you know, be a competent opposition," Williams told The Telegram in an interview.

"They're paid a salary to be opposition members and they should perform their jobs."

In 2003, the then-Opposition Tories had 11 staffers on the public payroll, according to House figures released by the Liberals. The current Liberal Opposition has nine.

The historical figures provided by the House are complicated by the haphazard record-keeping system in place at the legislature five years ago.

The then-director of financial operations has since left government and was charged in relation with the constituency allowance spending scandal.

The House of Assembly says the 2003 figures are based on the former director's written working papers, and cannot be definitively confirmed as valid.

However, officials at the legislature said the overall salary budget amount of \$2.4 million for House operations that year has been reconciled with those working papers and other financial reports, lending credence to their accuracy.