

Let the Opposition do its job

By YVONNE JONES

The House of Assembly is the forum where the premier and ministers are held accountable to the people between elections. Through legislative debates and question period, the official Opposition scrutinizes the government's policies and budget decisions.

Every minister is supported by legions of public servants who fulfill their every request. The government has hundreds of policy and financial analysts who research and implement policy initiatives. Together they produce thousands of pages of briefing notes, annual reports, media materials, studies, proposals and other policy documents every year.

On behalf of the people of the province, the Opposition sifts through these materials and gathers other information. Through this research and analysis, the Opposition is an essential part of the

accountability process ensuring that we all have a better, more effective and efficient government and programs.

Our office investigates and addresses all the issues facing the province, as well as 17 government departments and at least 30 other government agencies. In the last session alone, our office researched and prepared more than 800 questions for question period and researched 37 pieces of legislation that were brought before the House of Assembly.

The fundamental issue is a simple one. The constitutional duties of the official Opposition are fixed in nature and do not change with the number of opposition members. In fact, having fewer members increases pressure on the research staff since more responsibility for legislative research and analysis must be done at the staff level. Even Chief Justice Derek Green, in his report, noted that the caucuses needed more resources in order to

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properly discharge their duties.

To finally resolve this issue, and to depoliticize the process, the House of Assembly Management Commission agreed to hire a consulting firm to provide recommendations.

They found that all other provinces are ahead of our own in providing adequate funding to their opposition offices. For example,

Saskatchewan allocates over \$300,000 in base funding to its opposition office, while Nova Scotia allocates over \$400,000.

In our province, the consultant concluded that all caucuses were woefully underfunded, with the official Opposition office being the most underfunded. Among the 17 recommendations, the consultant advocated an additional \$126,000 for the government Progressive Conservative caucus, \$124,000 extra for the NDP office and \$162,000 more for the Liberals as the official Opposition.

The only recommendation voted down by the government members was the one pertaining to funding for the Liberal Opposition office. The three PC commission members — Trevor Taylor, Joan Burke and Elizabeth Marshall — voted to block all but \$12,000 of the funds targeted for the Opposition office. The Speaker reserved his vote for a future meeting.

By their votes, the government members have voted to deny the offi-

cial Opposition the basic funding required to fulfil its fundamental constitutional responsibilities and thereby hamper its ability to do the research that is essential to the job.

This is an abuse of the power of the majority. When the government chooses to damage the vigour of meaningful debate and inquiry in the House of Assembly, it damages the state of democracy in our province.

The premier has stated that he believes having seven strong opposition members in Ottawa will be in the best interests of the province. I challenge him to use the same logic in Newfoundland and Labrador, and to ensure that his opposition here, in our province, has the tools to effectively represent the people who disagree with his government's policies in the 48 districts that make up our House of Assembly.

Yvonne Jones is the Liberal MHA for Cartwright-L'Anse au Clair and the leader of the official Opposition.