

# Grounds for court challenge

*Ottawa-based group says Liberals should have received recommended funding*

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**ST. JOHN'S** — A legislative watchdog says the provincial Liberals have grounds for a court challenge after the House of Assembly Management Commission voted this week to deny the party extra money recommended in an independent consultants report.

Democracy Watch says the challenge could come under Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

It says the right of association was violated because the decision to deny the extra funding was based along party lines.

The commission hired Metrics EFG Inc. to write a report and recommend funding levels for each party in the House of Assembly.

The report was tabled at an Oct. 15 meeting of the commission which voted unanimously to give extra funding — more than \$125,000 each — to both the government and the third party NDP.

But the three government mem-

bers voted to reject an extra \$162,000 for the Opposition Liberals who received an increase of only \$12,000.

The two Liberals and sole NDP member on the commission voted for, deadlocking the vote.

This week, Speaker Roger Fitzgerald who chairs the commission, cast a tie breaking vote, siding with the government members.

Duff Conacher is the coordinator of Democracy Watch based in Ottawa.

"I think the parties have a right to the funding because tax payers aren't just funding the ruling party they're funding the entire system," says Conacher.

"Just because a ruling party wins a majority doesn't mean that the ruling party should be able to arbitrarily gut the funding that's been provided to support the oppositions party's operations."

Conacher says considering that the commission hired a non-partisan, independent consultant to do the report, it's recommendations should have been followed.

"They rejected this non partisan decision on, from what I can understand, completely on a partisan basis," he says.

The report states that "funding for opposition parties must ensure their ability to critique Government policy, and to offer alternatives to the approaches proposed by Government.

All caucuses should be provided with adequate levels of staff and other resources to ensure that they operate in an effective and efficient manner."

Conacher also points out that the PCs might be shooting themselves in the long-term foot.

"The Conservatives are likely not to rule forever and the situation could easily be reversed and it would just be as unfair in the future," he says. "Why set an unfair precedent."

A spokesman for the Liberals says the party is weighing its options about what to do next, but isn't ready to comment at this time.