

# Williams accused of eroding democracy as legislature set to open

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**ST. JOHN'S** — The Newfoundland and Labrador legislature opens for a brief fall sitting Tuesday amid concerns the government of Premier Danny Williams is stifling opposition debate and eroding democracy.

It has been a familiar complaint against Williams since his resounding electoral victory last year decimated the opposition, leaving them with only four members in the 48-seat house of assembly.

But the criticisms have stepped up in recent days after the Conservative government brushed off the Liberal Opposition's request for more funding, despite an independ-

ent consultant's recommendation in favour of it.

"Party politics 1, democracy 0," an editorial proclaimed last week in the St. John's Telegram, the province's largest daily newspaper.

Speaker Roger Fitzgerald, a Conservative, cast a tie-breaking vote at a committee meeting last week that denied the Liberals an additional \$162,000 for research and caucus support. That same committee approved funding increases for the governing Conservatives and New Democrats, as recommended by the consultant.

While the matter might appear to some to be mundane political gamesmanship, pundits say it's a troubling sign.

"I don't think there's anybody on the face of the Earth (that) believes that Roger Fitzgerald made the decision he made on his own," said Randy Simms, a host of a popular radio talk show broadcast provincewide.



Kelvin Parsons

"There's nothing wrong with partisan politics, the desire to win. It is a game after all to some degree. But what they did is an outrage to democracy and, my God, they must know that."

Liberal house leader Kelvin Par-

sons accused the Williams government of trying to diminish an already small opposition voice in the legislature.

"It's one thing to have electoral success at the polls. It's something else to try to totally eradicate the principles of democracy," Parsons said.

Williams was unavailable for comment, but government house leader Joan Burke said concerns about the strength of the Opposition were overblown.

"I think that their numbers may have gone down obviously, but I don't think the calibre of the Opposition and what they can bring into the legislature has weakened at all," Burke said.