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DUP backbench rebellion

Foster suffers unprecedented DUP backbench rebellion over bill to give ministers more power

Arlene Foster has failed to prevent the largest Stormont rebellion in DUP history, as the ultra-centralised party's discipline has broken down over her attempt to ram through a bill to give greater powers to individual ministers.

By Sam McBride, "Belfast Newsletter", Tuesday, 28th July 2020, 5:44 pm



Mrs Arlene Foster - not best pleased!!!

One of Arlene Foster's own party officers rebelled against the whip in today's key Assembly vote.

In a sign of the First Minister's weakened authority, 11 DUP MLAs actively abstained – by voting in person in both lobbies – this afternoon, despite the imposition of a whip ordering them to vote in favour of a highly significant bill.

The Executive Committee (Functions) Bill has come under fierce criticism from Mrs Foster's former special adviser, and the former strategic brain of the DUP for most of the last two decades, Richard Bullick, who had described it as contrary to DUP policy and constitutionally "dangerous."

The bill was jointly tabled by Mrs Foster and Michelle O'Neill. Ms O'Neill's support for the bill elicited no surprise because it is in line with longstanding Sinn Féin policy.

However, Mrs Foster's support for the bill – and her inability to answer some of the central criticisms being made by Mr Bullick – increasingly unnerved many DUP members, especially when it was revealed that Mrs Foster had based her support for the bill on an erroneous belief that any three ministers could call a major decision into the Executive, something which Mr Bullick highlighted was "nonsense".

In the final vote before the Assembly rises for the summer, MLAs overwhelmingly passed the bill into law by 58 votes to 13.

However, both the scale of the DUP rebellion and the identity of some of the rebels was extraordinary and point to deep unease within the party over Mrs Foster's judgement and attention to detail.

Of the DUP's 27 MLAs, five are ministers and two are whips, meaning that they were bound by their positions to support the legislation.

That means that of the remaining 20 DUP MLAs more than half rebelled.

And among the DUP rebels were a party officer – the party secretary, Michelle McIlveen, and Paula Bradley, who has been supportive of Mrs Foster's leadership.

Remarkably veteran North Antrim MLA Mervyn Storey also joined the rebels – just 24 hours after he had been one of three DUP speakers in the Assembly arguing against UUP MLA Doug Beattie's attempt to amend the bill to limit the power shift to ministers.

The full list of DUP MLAs who rebelled by abstaining:

Paula Bradley



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Thomas Buchanan

Jonathan Buckley

Joanne Bunting

Trevor Clarke

Alex Easton

Paul Frew

David Hilditch

William Humphrey

Michelle McIlveen

Mervyn Storey