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Abortion: Assembly rejects recent changes to NI laws

By Jayne McCormack BBC News NI Political Reporter

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The NI Assembly has voted to pass a motion to reject recent changes to abortion laws in Northern Ireland.

New abortion regulations drawn up by Westminster came into force in March after a vote in 2019.

The motion, brought by the DUP, passed by 46 votes to 40.

The vote has no effect on the laws but the DUP said it would send a message to Westminster that the regulations are not supported by Stormont.

A Sinn Féin amendment, which sought to alter the motion to only restrict access to abortions in cases of severe fetal impairments, such as Down's syndrome, was voted down.

DUP assembly member Paul Givan said Northern Ireland had been "treated with contempt" by the British government and urged all members to support the motion.

The party has said it wants to overturn the abortion laws and that Stormont should be able to create new legislation.

New chapter for abortion in NI but questions remain

Alliance MLA Paula Bradshaw accused the DUP and Sinn Féin of "playing politics" with a sensitive matter.

"They are trying to imply that any MLA that does support them does not care about children born with a disability, nothing could be further from the truth," she added.

Sinn Féin's Pat Sheehan said his party's position on abortion was clear since it voted to change its stance in 2018.

Independent unionist MLA and former Justice Minister Claire Sugden questioned why the DUP did not act to prevent Westminster taking control of the matter in 2019.

First Minister and DUP leader Arlene Foster criticised those comments as "very unfair."

"We have been consistently in favour of a pro-life position so it's wrong for the member to do that," she added.

The SDLP, UUP and Alliance Party view abortion as a matter of conscience so it is up to individual MLAs how they vote on the issue.

Dolores Kelly of the SDLP welcomed the motion, but her party colleague Matthew O'Toole said he would oppose it.

The Green Party and People Before Profit MLAs also voted against the motion, while TUV leader Jim Allister voted in favour

How did we get here?

Last July, MPs at Westminster voted to decriminalise abortion in Northern Ireland and create new laws.

Stormont was not functioning due to a row between the main power-sharing parties.

Prior to that House of Commons' vote, abortion was only allowed in very specific circumstances in Northern



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It then fell to the Northern Ireland Office to come up with a framework to oversee the provision for abortion services.

In March, the regulations were made public for the first time and set out when and where abortions could take place, as well as who could carry them out.

The following month, Northern Ireland's Department of Health instructed health trusts that abortions could now be carried out lawfully, in line with the regulations.

However, services are being provided on an interim basis as full abortion provision has not yet been commissioned.

Health Minister Robin Swann said it was a cross-cutting matter that needed to be approved by the whole executive.