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Freshmen Revolt: Why did 16 Democrats Break With Their Party?

POSTED BY ALICIA FREESE AND TERRI HALLENBECK ON THU, MAY 4, 2017 AT 11:49 PM



A group of Democratic lawmakers who supported Gov. Phil Scott's proposal confer outside his office Wednesday afternoon.

TERRI HALLENBECK

On Wednesday night, eight freshman Democrats in the Vermont House played a key role in the most dramatic act of the 2017 legislative session.

Along with eight other Democratic representatives, they broke ranks with their party leaders to support Republican Gov. Phil Scott's proposal to negotiate a statewide teachers' health insurance contract.

"The reason we were in the position we were in was because of the freshmen Democrats," said Rep. Heidi Scheuermann (R-Stowe).

“Most wayward freshmen class of all time,” said Rep. Sam Young (D-Glover), sounding somewhat exasperated.

The GOP coup was short-lived. As Republicans were about to triumph by a 74-73 margin, **House Speaker Mitzi Johnson (D-South Hero) cast a rare vote**, resulting in a tie that killed the proposal. Still, all anyone could talk about Thursday was the Democratic defections.

Under former House speaker Shap Smith, Democrats were a disciplined unit and the outcome of votes was almost always preordained: If a bill made it to the floor, Smith had made sure it had the votes to pass.

Johnson has either lost control of her caucus or deliberately given lawmakers a longer leash, depending on whom you ask. Intentional or not, it created an awfully close call.

“I probably have just a more collaborative style than people are used to here,” Johnson said Thursday. “I don’t want to make them choose their loyalties.”

“I don’t get pressure from them,” said Rep. Linda Joy Sullivan (D-Dorset), a first-year legislator who voted for Scott’s proposal because, she said, it was “fiscally responsible.” Rep. Jessica Brumsted (D-Shelburne), also a newcomer, said she wasn’t pushed to vote with the Democrats either.

More seasoned lawmakers, including Rep. Maureen Dakin (D-Colchester) and Rep. Kathy Keenan (D-St. Albans), agreed that Democratic leaders had given them free rein. “They knew what I was doing,” said Keenan. “Our caucus allows individuality.”

Even Rep. Matt Trieber (D-Rockingham), who is close friends with both Johnson and House Majority Leader Jill Krowinski (D-Burlington), felt comfortable voting against the majority. He said he texted Krowinski over the weekend to tell her he where he stood, and she thanked him and told him she’d be in touch Monday, but they never ended up talking.

Not everyone, however, felt so liberated. In at least one case, the Democratic leadership’s efforts at persuasion backfired. “They didn’t take no for an answer,” said Rep. Jay Hooper (D-Brookfield). “It pissed me off, to be frank.”

He said he voted for Scott’s proposal because it would address his constituents’ concerns about property taxes. “I think that my party, the left, hasn’t done enough to embrace the most important issue to all voters, even liberal Democrats: affordability,” said Hooper, **who, at age 23, is the second youngest lawmaker in the building**. His seat mate, Ben Jickling (I-Brookfield), is the youngest, at age 22. The latter also voted with the Republicans.

As Hooper spoke, seated on a couch outside the governor’s statehouse office, Rep. Jim Harrison (R-Chittenden) walked by and gave the young rep a sympathetic pat on the shoulder.

“I’m paying for it dearly,” Hooper said. “I can tell that there are certain individuals of authority in this building who are really not happy with me right now,” he explained. “And I am slowly becoming more OK with that because I don’t believe in this process being so scripted.”

Scheuermann is among the many Republicans encouraged by that sentiment. “I’ve been here 11 years and last night gave me a fresh perspective. For the first time in a long time, I felt we were having an open debate and honest debate that was not in the back rooms,” she said.

Tags: Phil Scott, Mitzi Johnson, Vermont legislature, teacher health insurance, Image



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