

Reports: Gareth McKeown



■ **FAMILY AND CLOSE TIES:** From left, former DUP special adviser Andrew Crawford, ex-aide Stephen Brimstone, John Robinson and Timothy Johnston

The role of DUP special advisers

THE actions of special advisers and the extent of their influence at Stormont has come under the microscope amid the renewable heat scandal.

The role of a 'Spad' is to 'assist and advise government ministers', but the RHI scandal has again raised concerns that the highly-paid party appointees are able to wield undue power.

In his BBC interview in December, former enterprise minister Jonathan Bell alleged that DUP special advisers Timothy Johnston and Andrew Crawford "were not allowing [the] scheme to be closed" at the point when costs were spiralling out of control in Autumn 2015.

Mr Johnston worked as special adviser to Peter Robinson and Arlene Foster as first minister, while Mr Crawford worked with Mrs Foster when RHI was first introduced. Both men denied the claims.

Senior civil servant Dr Andrew McCormick later also said he understood Mr Crawford influenced the decision to keep the scheme running.

The allegations were strenuously denied by the adviser, whose brother is an RHI claimant, but he said he would resign from his post because he

had "become the focus of the story". During a sitting of the assembly Jonathan Bell also claimed he was told he would not be allowed to introduce cost controls because advisers Timothy Johnston and John Robinson "have such extensive interests in the poultry industry".

The DUP described the claims as "outrageous, untrue and unfounded". Mr Robinson, an aide to economy minister Simon Hamilton, confirmed his father-in-law was

a claimant but said he did not benefit and would step aside from any future involvement in RHI to avoid the "accusation or perception of a conflict of interest". In addition to accusations of exerting excessive influence on RHI policy, one former special adviser is also an RHI beneficiary. Stephen Brimstone, who worked under both Peter Robinson and Arlene Foster as first minister, is a confirmed claimant, according to the DUP but further details

on subsidy payments have never been revealed.

Mr Brimstone resigned in November to pursue a career in the private sector, but under parliamentary privilege last month TUV leader Jim Allister alleged the ex-adviser was using a non-domestic RHI boiler to heat his home.

Despite numerous phone calls, emails and even a visit from *The Irish News* to his Co Antrim home, the former adviser has remained silent on the allegations.