

Biden visits Ireland to mark 25th anniversary of Good Friday Agreement, snubs UK government

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US President Joe Biden begins a five-day visit to Ireland on Tuesday to mark the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement establishing Nationalist-Unionist power sharing in Northern Ireland and ending armed conflict between the Irish Republican Army and British and Loyalist forces.

Biden will arrive in Belfast in the evening greeted by UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak but will spend fewer than 24 hours in Northern Ireland, travelling to Dublin Wednesday afternoon.

Despite all protestations to the contrary, the perfunctory visit is a snub to the UK's Conservative government, which hoped to use Biden's visit as a victory lap proving its Windsor Framework agreement with the European Union over Northern Ireland a success and that Anglo-American tensions over Brexit have been put to bed.

This proved impossible as neither proposition is true. The UK-EU agreement has still left Northern Ireland without a government, with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) opposed and refusing to constitute a new Assembly, jeopardising the Good Friday Agreement in which the US is heavily politically and economically invested.

While in Belfast, Biden will give a speech at Ulster University, address business and civic leaders and, according to the BBC, "may speak to political parties." But he cannot address the Northern Ireland Assembly, created in 1998 in accordance with Good Friday Agreement, because it has been suspended since February 3, 2022—as it was for three years between January 2017 and January 2020.

The Assembly was collapsed last February by the DUP to protest the Northern Ireland Protocol regulating the passage of British goods through Northern Ireland. The open land border with European Union member state, the Republic of Ireland, enshrined in the 1998 Agreement, has led the EU to seek assurances that its laws and standards will be upheld by the UK, meaning inspections on goods travelling between Britain and Northern Ireland. This is seen by unionists as an unacceptable step toward a united Ireland.

Elections to the Assembly in May 2022 made the Irish nationalist Sinn Féin the largest party. The DUP has since refused to nominate a deputy speaker as required by the power-sharing agreement, meaning the Assembly cannot function.

While Boris Johnson, and briefly Liz Truss, were prime minister this was lent under-the-table support while the UK government took a belligerent stance to negotiations with the EU, threatening to unilaterally overwrite its own Brexit agreement.

Sunak has attempted to normalise relations, agreeing revisions to the Protocol this February with the EU—the Windsor Framework. The deal was approved by parliament, with 22 Tory MPs aligned with Johnson voting against and 47 abstaining. All six DUP members also voted against, with its leader in the House of Commons Jeffrey Donaldson saying the agreement "harms our place in the internal market of the United Kingdom."

Sunak's move to secure an agreement with the EU was substantially driven by pressure from the United States, whose corporations have major financial interests in the Republic of Ireland which is used as a low tax investment platform for accessing the European Single Market. The Irish-American lobby is also a significant force in Democratic Party politics.

Biden praised the Windsor Framework as an "essential step to ensuring that the hard-earned peace and progress" of the Good Friday Agreement was "preserved and strengthened". But he warned that Stormont should be restored: "Those institutions embody the principle of devolved, power-sharing, representative government at the core of the Good Friday Agreement."

But it is the sectarian framework of the agreement gridlocking Stormont, with the domination of unionist and nationalist parties ensured and both given the power to shut down the Assembly.

When the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998, the

World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board wrote, in a statement republished today: “the new agreement does not lay the basis for ending the sectarian conflicts that have been cultivated by British imperialism for centuries. It upholds the conception that the fundamental divisions in Ireland are those of religion and national identity...

“An agreement that perpetuates social inequality and economic insecurity cannot provide the foundations for overcoming the reactionary legacy of religious and communal divisions.”

This is now so clear that the BBC published an extensive piece Monday by its Northern Ireland political editor Enda McClafferty asking, “does the peace deal still work?” The article noted, “For nine of the 25 years since the Good Friday Agreement was signed Stormont has been shut down...

“[F]ar from shoring up the gains of the Good Friday Agreement the Stormont safeguards have held back political progress.

“They have led to stop-start government and hindered long-term efforts to deal with deep-seated problems in health and education.

“Beyond Stormont many believe the vetoes have only served to cement further polarisation in Northern Ireland.

“Repeated surveys show public confidence in Northern Ireland’s political institutions remains consistently low.”

Biden’s visit this week has therefore been carefully choreographed to warn the UK government to get its house in order, while avoiding an inflammatory rift which would pile more pressure on the already creaking structures of the Agreement. Though Biden will spend more time in the Republic of Ireland, including meetings with President Michael Higgins and Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, much of it will be focussed on personal visits to distant cousins in counties Mayo and Louth. The Dail (parliament) is not being reconvened to be addressed by him.

On Monday, Sunak issued his statement praising the Good Friday Agreement and welcoming Biden’s visit, imploring the DUP without naming them to “get on with the business of governance.”

In an interview with BBC *Good Morning Ulster*, Northern Ireland Minister Steve Baker did not exclude the possibility of a return to direct rule of Northern Ireland by Westminster, saying, “We would very much prefer to restore local ministers to their place but clearly we cannot allow things to go on very much longer with the current arrangements because it is not a sustainable basis to be asking officials to take difficult decisions without ministers in place.”

He continued, “But equally we are very well aware that direct rule would be a very serious step.”

Such a decision would intensify the conflict with the DUP,

which still has substantial influence within the Tory Party, and provoke a clash with Sinn Féin if Westminster refused to involve the Republic of Ireland. Party vice-president Michelle O’Neil warned last October, “We’re not going back to the days of London ruling our affairs here.

“There’s very much a role for joint partnership between London and Dublin, that’s where we’re headed in the event of things not being up and running.”

The working class north and south of the border cannot advance their interests and secure their democratic rights through this rotten framework of British Unionism and Irish nationalism, and the contending imperialist interests represented by Westminster, Washington and Dublin.

In a second statement published in 1998, following the ratification of the agreement, the WSWS Editorial Board concluded:

A resolution of the profound social and democratic problems facing Irish workers cannot and will not be overcome by attempts to refurbish the existing mechanisms of capitalist rule. Sweeping away the legacy of backwardness and religious antagonism requires a radical restructuring of economic and political life. The working class is the only social force capable of mobilizing all of the oppressed to carry out such a revolutionary change. The critical question is the development of a politically independent movement of the working class, and this requires a conscious break with the politics of nationalism and reformism.

A new party of the working class must be built based on a programme that addresses the universal need of working people for decent jobs and living standards, champions the defense of democratic rights, and fights for social equality. On the basis of such a socialist programme, all sections of workers—Protestant and Catholic, Irish and British—can and must be united in a struggle against the common oppressor—capitalism.

The same basic issues are posed starkly twenty-five years later.



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