

Biden navigates Brexit, Northern Ireland crisis in visit to Belfast

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Every element of US President Joe Biden's visit to Northern Ireland Wednesday was strained.

Marking the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement ending The Troubles, it took place amid a crisis of the political system established by the Agreement exacerbated by the gaping wound in western geopolitics, Brexit.

Northern Ireland has had no functioning devolved government for more than a year, one of the nine years that the Assembly has been suspended during its 25-year existence. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) has vetoed the formation of a new executive, a power given to it by the Good Friday Agreement as the largest unionist party. It is protesting a UK-European Union (EU) agreement regulating the movement of goods through Northern Ireland, whose border with EU member state the Republic of Ireland is required to be entirely open.

While the Assembly remains gridlocked, the attempt to patch up relations between the UK and the EU after Brexit is at risk. The United States is concerned both for the impact this has on the united NATO war front against Russia and for the threat it poses to the stability of its neighbouring low-tax entry point to Europe, the Republic of Ireland.

Given this embarrassment, the *Guardian* reports that an "early consideration of a visit [by Biden] to Stormont [the Assembly building] to meet the political parties was ruled out."

Biden's time in Northern Ireland was kept as short as possible, with BBC political editor Chris Mason writing of the "blink and you'll miss it" trip, "the president will be in Northern Ireland for around 15 hours, half of which he'll be in bed."

Until Wednesday morning, it was unclear whether Biden would meet at all with the leaders of the main Northern Irish parties, and until less than two hours before who would be invited to the meeting and where it would

take place. In the end, the leaders of Sinn Féin, the DUP, the Ulster Unionist Party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party and the Alliance Party received a five-minute audience each before he delivered a speech at Ulster University.

Biden's task in his speech was to avoid inflaming the crisis, while lightly pressuring the DUP into ending its boycott and scolding the UK government for failing to resolve the situation.

He told reporters on Air Force One on the flight over that his priorities were, "Make sure the Irish accords and Windsor agreements stay in place. Keep the peace and that's the main thing," adding, remarkably, "It looks like we're going to keep our fingers crossed."

Several leading figures in the DUP issued denunciations. Former leader Arlene Foster and current MP Sammy Wilson were the most explicit, with Foster telling the right-wing GB News that Biden "hates the United Kingdom, I don't think there's any doubt about that," and Wilson telling the *Telegraph*, "He's anti-British. He is pro-republican and he has made his antipathy towards Protestants in particular very well known."

Wilson added, "I hope that [Biden] doesn't come here and lecture us about democracy and getting the Stormont assembly going... I don't think he should expect us to respond to that." DUP peer Nigel Dodds told the *Telegraph* similarly, "Pressure from an American administration which is so transparently pro-nationalist constitutes no pressure on us at all."

Special assistant to Biden Amanda Sloat was forced to respond Wednesday morning, "I think the track record of the president shows that he is not anti-British," stressing his "engagement with leaders of all of Northern Ireland parties from both of the two main communities." Biden stated that he was "here to listen."

In his speech, lasting less than 20 minutes, Biden made

similar overtures, specifically referencing “Ulster Scots immigrants” to the US and stating his “commitment to all the people” of Northern Ireland.

Pressing his agenda, he used the standard levers of US influence over its allies—prestige, platitudes, trade and investment.

UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was put in his place by having a planned full bilateral meeting with Biden scaled back to a coffee morning, according to the *New York Times*. A Downing Street spokesperson countered weakly, “I wouldn’t characterise it as that.” Extraordinarily Sunak did not even attend Biden’s speech at Ulster University.

US aides let it be known that the Tory government’s much-pursued post-Brexit US-UK trade deal was not under “active” discussion and unlikely to begin until 2025 at the earliest, after the next presidential election.

While the UK got the stick, Biden dangled the carrot of investment in front of the DUP. His trade envoy to Northern Ireland Joe Kennedy wrote in the unionist newspaper the *NewsLetter*, “Over the last decade, political stability has drawn nearly £1.5 billion in new investment from the United States alone.”

US ambassador to the UK Jane Hartley introduced his address at Ulster University by saying, “The United States is the largest source of foreign direct investment in Northern Ireland and, as a former businesswoman I can tell you, you invest in something when you believe in it. And we believe in you. We believe in your progress.”

Biden leaned into the theme, telling his audience Northern Ireland’s GDP had doubled in the 25 years since the Good Friday Agreement and “If things continue to move in the right direction, it will triple,” with “scores of American corporations” ready to invest as long as politicians could “sustain the peace and unleash the incredible economic opportunity.”

Describing the recent Windsor Framework agreement between the UK and the EU on the movement of goods through Northern Ireland as “an essential step,” he added carefully, “As a friend, I hope it’s not too presumptuous for me to say that I believe democratic institutions established by the Good Friday Agreement remain critical to the future of Northern Ireland.”

He repeated, “A government that works to find ways through hard problems together is going to draw even greater opportunity to this region. So, I hope the Assembly is restored. That’s a decision for you to make, not me. But I hope it happens.”

The bulk of the Northern Irish population, Catholic and Protestant alike, are not the beneficiaries of US largesse.

In the last year, household disposable income in the region fell a staggering 28.7 percent to £95.10 a week on average, twice as fast as the fall for the UK as a whole. Biden’s pitch is to the ruling class and the affluent middle class.

What impact it will have remains to be seen. Leader of the DUP Sir Jeffrey Donaldson said he welcomed Biden’s “reference today to the Ulster Scots” and “his reference also to his own British ancestry,” but explained it would not “change the political dynamic” in Northern Ireland: “We believe the government needs to go further in terms of protecting Northern Ireland’s place within the United Kingdom.”

Several papers report that the DUP would be more inclined to end its boycott of the Assembly after the local elections scheduled for May, fearing that to do so earlier would see it lose votes to the hardline Traditional Unionist Voice—just as the Ulster Unionist Party lost out earlier to the DUP.

Nothing is guaranteed, especially with Biden spending the next two days in the Republic of Ireland in likely less restrained fashion, meeting President Michael Higgins and Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, making a speech to the Oireachtas (the country’s bicameral parliament), visiting distant relatives and praying at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Knock.

The sectarian framework established by the Good Friday Agreement is an anti-democratic straitjacket on the working class, preventing it from confronting and overcoming its divisions in a joint class struggle for common social interests and putting political life in the hands of DUP and Sinn Féin MPs and Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) jostling for sectional interests.



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