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Ireland-USA

# The Ireland of Memory and the Ireland of Reality – Biden’s Visit to Ireland

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**As Joe Biden prepares to visit Ireland, seeking out his roots, he is more authentic than many of his American predecessors. There has not been an American US president since John F Kennedy who held such a semi-sacred status in Ireland. Kennedy’s visit produced mass crowds in the 1960s; I witnessed it as a child. With 10% of Americans claiming Irish heritage, paying homage to the Irish has always been de rigueur for any US president.**

Biden makes his Irishness clear and has always made relations with Ireland essential to any relationship with the UK, especially concerning the North of Ireland. Indeed, commentators have said that the real special relationship, turbocharged since Brexit, is between the US and Ireland. Ireland is English-speaking and provides a bridge to the EU, with many US multinationals headquartered in its capital, Dublin. Most of the presidential visit will be in the Republic with an address to the Dail, only the fourth president to do so, and ancestral visits to Counties Louth and Mayo.

The trip to the North of Ireland was meant to include an address to the Stormont Assembly, but as the DUP has frozen its operation, that is now impossible. The official reason for the trip is to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, which the US played a large part in securing, both through the chairmanship of Senator George Mitchell and the support of President Clinton. There is an irony in the DUP blocking the Stormont Executive functioning as they also refused to support the Good Friday Agreement, which was signed in their absence.

Much has changed since the Good Friday Agreement was signed. In the North, the demographics have altered, and Sinn Fein is now the Assembly’s largest party. It is clear to all that the days of Unionist hegemony and of “A Protestant parliament for a Protestant people”, as the Northern statelet’s first PM, James Craig, said in the 1920s, are long gone. The Windsor Framework has demonstrated the limitations of Unionist power and that the British government sees them as a hindrance and wants to get a deal with the EU. The Holy Grail for the Brexiteers and the Tory government is a trade deal with the US, and Biden made clear that there was no hope of that unless peace was declared with the EU and the Irish border situation defused.

In the North of Ireland, apart from the DUP, most parties are happy with the region being in the EU Single Market and benefiting from that. Sinn Fein, and now the SDLP as well, are pushing hard for a border poll, and most observers think that with the major political shift in the North of Ireland, that will happen soon. This could not have been foreseen when the Agreement was signed 25 years ago, but the trajectory is towards reunifying Ireland, and both the Americans and the British are aware of this.

In the South, Biden will address a Dail, where Sinn Fein’s leader, Mary Lou Mc Donald, is the opposition leader and, with her party running at 35% in the polls, widely regarded as the next Taoiseach. In Washington this year, at the St Patrick’s Day celebrations and events, Mc Donald was feted and appeared everywhere, almost upstaging the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, while Jeffrey Donaldson, the DUP leader, was ignored and sidelined.

The wind is blowing in Sinn Fein’s direction, and the Americans are keen to have a good relationship with the possible new government. Apart from Brexit and relations with the EU, the US will also be concerned with the debate on NATO and neutrality in Ireland. The Irish government has put out feelers about whether Ireland, neutral since its foundation, should join NATO like Finland and Sweden. There has been no groundswell to do so for geographical and historic reasons. Geographical because Ireland does not share a border with Russia and still regards Eastern Europe as distant. Historic, as Ireland has always considered its traditional neutrality, particularly about wars involving the UK, as important. Sinn Fein has been one of the leading voices in the pro-neutrality camp, and Biden

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will likely seek to assure them that there will be no pressure from the US to join NATO.

So in many respects, Biden’s visit occurs at a critical turning point in Irish history and is also significant in that he could be the last US President of Irish heritage at a time when US foreign policy’s foremost focus is turning away from the Ireland of memory and towards the Indo Pacific region, and as Irish American identity slowly declines and the US becomes a demographically very different country.

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Source: [Anti\\*Capitalist Resistance](#).

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