

# **Biden in Ireland: The Failure of Neoliberalism**

Friday 21 April 2023, by [O'DRISCOLL Eugene](#) (Date first published: 13 April 2023).

**Joe Biden comes to Ireland this week, looking for iconic moments to reinforce and revive the promises made by Bill Clinton to the people of the North after the Good Friday Agreement and in pursuit for his homecoming moment like John F. Kennedy in the 60s. He'll get neither in terms of the cultural impact and hysteria of these two previous presidents. The fact of the matter is that the two of them sold Ireland dreams, and today's Ireland, which contains two failed states north and south of the border, cannot dream.**

Biden has cited his desire to continue Clinton's legacy in Belfast, marking 25 years after the Good Friday agreement. Despite his imperialist escapades elsewhere, Clinton is viewed in popular history here as the architect of peace. Along with his buddy Tony Blair, he sold to the Northern state, political parties and general population the same visions they sold to the rest of the world of Thatcherite "there is no alternative" neoliberalism, marked by austerity and privatization in the name of efficiency and in prosperity (one of Blair's favorite buzzwords) for all. Looking retrospectively, it wasn't so much the dreams that Clinton and Blair sold that the people of the North of Ireland bought, it was rather any alternative, any stop to the violence, any hope of normality in material terms, and a hope for a better future.

Biden will come to Belfast and say very similar things to what Clinton said so many years ago. The messages he will send are those of investment and US commitment to peace. But they won't have the same impact.

Twenty-five years on from this agreement, Northern Ireland is a failed state. A failed state which came off the back of the previously set-up sectarian political establishment in place since partition. The Executive does not currently function as the DUP (intransigent ethno-nationalist Unionists who generally back right-wing social and economic policies) have withdrawn from the power-sharing agreement due to their discontent with the post-Brexit trade arrangements, even though they themselves endorsed Brexit. Many state functions are currently administered by the civil service. Tory budget cuts from Westminster are expected to further devastate essential services. The police service has failed - paramilitaries, who largely function as drug dealers and loan sharks more than anything else, are acting in the open, generating headlines and inciting violence. Debilitating drug use of heroin and cocaine has soared in recent years. These are all symptoms of a working class that has been left behind, people who have been marginalized, by the ruling parties' aggressive, relentless, uncompromising and ultimately uninspiring pursuit of neoliberalism.

Time and time again, the power-sharing political parties, including the nominally 'socialist' nationalist party Sinn Fein, have made decisions in constructing an economy and a society which is based upon recruiting foreign investment for jobs, recruiting foreign visitors as a cash cow, and introducing austerity measures. (Sociologist Colin Coulter has illuminated this process in meticulous details in several articles over the years.) The ruling parties have pursued tax incentives among other benefits to bring multinational corporations to the Northern state, which has several times

resulted in the extremely ironic and tragically comedic situation of anti-partitionist Sinn Fein ministers trying to compete in alluring these companies up north rather than down south. Belfast, like Dublin, is increasingly becoming a soulless playground for tourists – and this has been a conscious political effort in post-conflict Belfast, with the development of the Cathedral Quarter in the city centre during the late 90s as Belfast’s Temple Bar – expensive pints and excessive paddywhackery.

In recent years, property development has increasingly featured as a means of “urban” and “economic” growth, and in this same artificial vein, in the same area of the city, a few decades on, large amounts of property were sold off. Symbolically, In the last week, an event was hosted at the James Connolly Centre in West Belfast in which Sinn Fein councilors were in attendance, and the owner of the largest ‘property management’ company in West Belfast, a company which is benefitting substantially on the misfortune of people and the imbalance of power between leasers and leasees that the housing crisis has caused, either brazenly or ignorantly publicly showing where their interests align.

Fittingly, Joe Biden’s only public appearance in Belfast will pick up where Clinton left off in some ways. He will talk about prosperity in a post-Brexit Northern Ireland and US support and investment in that process. The address will be held at Ulster University’s new campus in Belfast, which is itself the poster-boy for the neoliberal regeneration strategy for the city center. The recently-built architectural monstrosity is gray and imposing, and almost symbolically makes no effort whatsoever to blend in with its surroundings. The university is aggressively trying to expand, and like so many other universities in Ireland and Britain, one of its key strategies is to recruit international students, who pay higher tuition, with the primary motivation to increase profits. University-owned and private developers are building more luxury student housing in the area. Student housing is a doubled-edged racket insofar as it makes accommodation more expensive, and in some cases unaffordable, while at the same time making these areas unaffordable and uninhabitable for locals. On the other side of the same coin, HMOs have rushed to buy other properties in surrounding areas, with the view to offering relatively cheaper housing of poorer quality to students who will accept lower housing standards, in a way that has been the norm for the Holylands area near Queens University Belfast in the south side.

Residing in Belfast, it is nauseating to witness these effects in real-time and to see that the policies and plans pursued are mirroring the ones that have failed the city the past few decades and the ones that destroyed Dublin. It feels as if our own housing crisis and general urban decay is occurring through the same processes, but lags a few years behind. Buildings of architectural and historical value are being left derelict for property speculation, hotels and student housing are being built despite the increased and urgent demand for affordable social housing. Prices are increasing, wages are not, and the city feels more and more unlivable.

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Biden will spend more time down south and will visit his ancestral homelands over the few days that follow, seeking to emulate John F. Kennedy’s trip to Ireland in 1963. JFK’s election and subsequent visit to Ireland in many ways represented a triumph – even if only a symbolic one – for the psyche of many of the Irish people. For an island battered by hundreds of years of colonialism, and a fumbling state which was economically unimaginative, governed by an internal ruling class and very dependent upon trade with Britain, Kennedy represented “one of our own”, someone who (despite his very elitist upbringing) had reached the most powerful position in the world. Many households in Ireland had portraits of JFK in the sitting room alongside the Virgin Mary and the Pope. You would be hard pressed to find an Irish person of suitable age who doesn’t remember where they were when he was assassinated. This isn’t to champion the political decisions of JFK, but rather to assert that

his visit to Ireland was a seminal moment in Irish political and popular history. Kennedy came to Ireland and preached for increased freedom, “anti-Communism” and increased cooperation in a globalized world.

To be sure, the most powerful media outlets will undoubtedly fawn over Biden’s every move and promote the visit as the main story in Ireland. There will be thousands upon thousands at his public address in Mayo. Biden will repeatedly speak of the historical ties between the two nations and the necessity for continued co-operation and shared prosperity. He will undoubtedly say things very similar to Kennedy, which highlights both a vacuousness of political speak but also a genuine lack of imagination of both alternative pasts or alternative futures.

Biden can talk all the “blarney” he wants. But he won’t inspire hope. Because the Republic of Ireland, as things stands, offers no hope. The things Biden will mention – American financial investment and political “cooperation” won’t help and no one really thinks they will help, especially as it is American capital which is in part cause for the “absolute state” (to use a specifically Irish colloquial saying) that the nation is in.

The Free State has been transformed into the worst neoliberal nightmare imaginable due to the policy decisions the center-right ruling cabal of Fine Gael and Fianna Fail have made over the past few decades. The most pressing issue right now down south is also the housing crisis, with demand significantly outstripping supply. Mortgages are out of the question for younger people. It has become a nation of renters, which is even more undesirable when considering that renters receive. It is almost unfathomable. Opportunists in Dublin are ‘fixing up’ sheds in their backyards and renting them as ‘flats’. Migrant workers come to Ireland and not uncommonly are paying 400 euros a month to share a room with others. A COVID-era eviction ban has just been lifted remorselessly, and thousands upon thousands are expected to become homeless in the next month or two.

The GDP of the republic sits as one of the highest per capita in the world but these numbers are inflated due to the amount of corporations and rich individuals who use Ireland as a tax haven. The country now sits as one with one of the highest costs of living in Europe, and everything has gotten more expensive in the past winter. In comparison with other western European countries, the government offered very little support to deal with rising heating and electricity costs. Ireland consistently scores poorly in terms of the country’s biodiversity and in its carbon footprint, and nothing serious has been done to address these issues. Hospitals are overcrowded and understaffed thanks to continuous and progressive austerity. The labor market is desperate in various ways and wages are stagnating.

Sinn Fein, the same party who has pursued the neoliberal agenda outlined above north of the border, is the leader of the government in waiting in the next election as the party of “change”, the center-left alternative who in the south, claim they will be able to solve the housing crisis. But they are already facing vitriol and scaremongering from economists, multinational corporations, and the media establishment will continue as they try to frighten the population of the consequences of a (moderately) left-wing government, to tell us what they have been telling us for the past 30 years, that “there is no alternative.” It is the age-old story facing any ascendant leftist tide. At the same time, the party itself is already caving in to pressures and concerns about their governability. Overtures are already being made to key companies and industries that Ireland will ‘stay open for business’ in a Sinn Fein-led government. Sinn Fein has not yet ruled out the possibility of a coalition with Fianna Fail, the enablers of the banking collapse earlier this millennium and one of the two parties that has ruled the state since its inception.

Perhaps the most interesting context of Biden’s visit is the fact that Ireland is arguably more dependent on the US than ever and is in several ways more prone to American imperialist-capitalist

influence than ever before. The investment and involvement Biden will speak of are part of the problem.

Multinational corporations, many of which are American, employ large amounts of Ireland's university-educated populations due to the very business-friendly tax rates and the relatively cheap source of English-speaking and educated talent bases. The tech industry is one of the leading sectors of these multinationals, and it is an industry in which thousands of layoffs are expected in the months and years that follow. In other cases, companies use Ireland as a tax-haven without actually operating in Ireland, simply funneling their money from one state to another.

US private equity firms are some of the leaders in vulture funds, which have exponentially exacerbated the housing crisis. The current Irish government has consistently balked at seriously regulating them, and existing Taoiseach Leo Varadkar has even gone as far as to state that the term 'vulture fund' is too harsh.

In addition to the multinational companies present in Ireland, another sector which props up the economy is tourists and a large portion of these come from the US. Hotels and AirBnB properties are more profitable than apartment blocks and regular tenants, and therefore the large demand for housing and lucrative profits from tourists at once makes the rich richer and worsens the housing crisis. Additionally, bar owners, restaurants, owners of travel agencies reap the profits but it is the waiters, cleaners and other service staff who depend on these industries to scrape by. An Oireachtas (the Irish parliament) report from 2021 stated that 67% of people in rural Ireland worked in tourism. This is scandalous. This dependence is concerning in an economic context alone, but one must especially consider the social cost and power imbalance of this arrangement. As one reporter wrote in an article in 2020 about Killarney's dependence on American tourists, the place is lovely, but "you can't eat the views." The idea that the main utilizable purpose of one's home and most valued sites to become a profitable playground for Americans every summer is very neocolonial in nature and is surely socially damaging. Ireland does not yet have any serious or substantial anti-tourist activist movement to mirror those in Spain and Italy.

In the Celtic Tiger years, and the aftermath, a cliché trotted out that Ireland was now closer to "Berlin than to Boston". Ireland has long been the EU's poster-boy, its good student, its economic miracle. Ironically, many commentators have explained the geopolitical and economic shifts which have accompanied the Russia-Ukraine conflict have increased the United States' political, economic, and military influence in Europe, and by extension Ireland. The EU has become increasingly militaristic in its conversations and its rhetoric and has long exceeded its initial stated purpose of a 'common market' and 'economic integration'.

Biden's visit is timely as Fine Gael and Fianna Fail as well as allied media punditry are pushing to re-examine the state's longstanding principle of neutrality and manufacture consent for NATO membership. Just this past week, the government has put forward 'public forums' to gauge interest in a reversal of this policy. Opposition have described this as propaganda, and a thinly-veiled attempt to stoke interest and make the prospect more appetizing to the public.

God knows what their motivations are. Are they pursuing this to curry favor within the EU, and to follow the leaders, as usual? Are they just brainwashed by EU and US warhawks? Are they using this as a smokescreen to distract from the housing crisis? Why are they leading such a large and important discussion when they are surely on the way out in the next election? As in any case of unpopular governance, it is difficult what to discern what is cynical political strategy to stay in power, what is earnest belief, and what is sheer malice and contempt for the public's appetite.

It will be interesting to see if Biden refers directly or indirectly to the discussion on Irish neutrality,

and the conflict in Ukraine. In an issue fueled by geopolitical concerns and fearmongering over Russia, we must actually ask Lenin's question: 'who stands to gain?'

The US obviously already values Ireland strategically, as Shannon Airport is being economically propped up by refueling stops by the US military (which infringes upon Irish neutrality). The US Department of Defense made \$205.6 billion dollars in the 2022 fiscal year in selling weapons to foreign governments. Military-industrial complex leader Lockheed-Martin, which led a conference in Dublin this year with a session titled 'European Defense Co-operation Post Ukraine' recently sold arms to NATO's newest member, Finland, in a deal worth billions. The political doublespeak is incendiary and misleading. 'Defense' means offense, as weapons, which can and have killed innocent civilians, including extraordinary amounts of children, are imported. Similarly, 'nuclear deterrence' means escalation. These are words that the US military-defense complex have propagandized and warped for years, and will probably be sold to the Irish public in the coming months.

Ireland, with its own colonial past, must resist US imperialism within Ireland, and any efforts to join the NATO war machine. The recent past of this island, north and south, has been miserable - fueled by the "there is no alternative" capitalism promoted by the Irish ruling class and external powers - which will be highlighted and evident in Biden's visit. The sizable discontent is finding its voices in many ways and US investment and interest in Ireland does not offer hope. We cannot cling to the old dreams anymore. We need no more doses of the medicine of neoliberalism that has poisoned us.

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• New Politics. April 13, 2023:

<https://newpol.org/biden-in-ireland-the-failure-of-neoliberalism/>

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