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Northern Ireland: The Peace Process, Ongoing Challenges, and U.S. Interests

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SUMMARY

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Northern Ireland: The Peace Process, Ongoing Challenges, and U.S. Interests

Between 1969 and 1999, roughly 3,500 people died as a result of political violence in Northern Ireland, which is one of four component "nations" of the United Kingdom (UK). The conflict, often referred to as "the Troubles," has its origins in the 1921 division of Ireland and has reflected a struggle between different national, cultural, and religious identities. Protestants in Northern Ireland largely define themselves as British and support remaining part of the UK (*unionists*). Many Catholics in Northern Ireland consider themselves Irish and support a united Ireland (*nationalists*).

Successive U.S. Administrations and many Members of Congress have actively supported the Northern Ireland peace process. U.S. development aid provided through the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) has sought to encourage economic development and reconciliation. Congressional hearings have focused on the peace process, human rights, and addressing Northern Ireland's legacy of violence (often termed *dealing with the past*). Some Members have expressed interest in how *Brexit*—the UK's withdrawal as a member of the European Union (EU) in January 2020—is affecting Northern Ireland.

The Peace Agreement: Progress to Date and Ongoing Challenges

In 1998, the UK and Irish governments and key Northern Ireland political parties reached a negotiated political settlement. The resulting Good Friday Agreement, or Belfast Agreement, recognized that a change in Northern Ireland's constitutional status as part of the UK can come about only with the consent of a majority of the people in Northern Ireland (as well as with the consent of a majority in Ireland). The agreement called for devolved government—the transfer of specified powers from London to Belfast—with a Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive in which unionist and nationalist parties would share power. It also contained provisions on decommissioning (disarmament) of paramilitary weapons, policing, human rights, UK security normalization (demilitarization), and the status of prisoners.

Despite a much-improved security situation since 1998, implementing the peace agreement proved challenging. In 2007, the pro-British Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Fein, the nationalist political party traditionally associated with the Irish Republican Army (IRA), reached a landmark power-sharing deal. Tensions and distrust persisted, however, and Brexit and other contentious issues have hindered the functioning of Northern Ireland's government in recent years. Assembly elections took place in May 2022, but the DUP blocked the work of the Assembly and prevented the formation of a new Executive to protest the post-Brexit arrangements for Northern Ireland. In late January 2024, the DUP accepted a package of measures proposed by the UK government to address Brexit-related concerns and ended its boycott on Northern Ireland's power-sharing institutions, paving the way for the devolved government to be reestablished in early February 2024. Other issues facing Northern Ireland in its search for peace and reconciliation include reducing sectarian divisions, dealing with the past, addressing lingering concerns about paramilitary and dissident activity, and promoting further economic development.

Brexit and Northern Ireland

Brexit has added to political and societal divisions within Northern Ireland. Since 1998, as security checkpoints were dismantled in accordance with the peace agreement and because both the UK and Ireland belonged to the EU single market and customs union, the land border on the island of Ireland effectively disappeared, helping promote peace and a dynamic cross-border economy. The UK and the EU agreed to post-Brexit trade and customs arrangements for Northern Ireland to retain this open border in a Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. Implementation of the protocol—which began in January 2021—led to some trade disruptions between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK and exacerbated tensions in the region. In February 2023, the UK and the EU announced a new agreement—known as the Windsor Framework—aimed at resolving challenges posed by the protocol. The DUP, however, asserted that the Windsor Framework did not fully address the party's concerns and pressed for additional changes, resulting in the January 2024 deal between the UK government and the DUP. Brexit has renewed debate about Northern Ireland's constitutional status and prompted calls from Sinn Fein and others for a *border poll*, or referendum, on whether Northern Ireland should remain part of the UK or join Ireland.

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Overview

Between 1969 and 1999, roughly 3,500 people died as a result of political violence in Northern Ireland, which is a part of the United Kingdom (UK). The conflict, often referred to as "the Troubles," has its modern origins in the 1921 division of Ireland (see map in **Figure 1**).[1] At its core, the conflict reflects a struggle between different national, cultural, and religious identities. Protestants in Northern Ireland largely define themselves as British and support Northern Ireland's continued incorporation in the UK (*unionists*). Many Catholics in Northern Ireland consider themselves Irish and support a united Ireland (*nationalists*). In the past, more militant unionists (*loyalists*) and more militant nationalists (*republicans*) were willing to use force to achieve their goals.[2] Results from the 2021 census indicate that for the first time in Northern Ireland's history, more people in Northern Ireland are from a Catholic background (45.7% of the population) than from a Protestant or other Christian background (43.5% of the population).[3]

The Troubles were sparked in late 1968, when a civil rights movement was launched in Northern Ireland mostly by Catholics, who had long faced discrimination in areas such as electoral rights, housing, and employment. This civil rights movement was met with violence by some unionists, loyalists, and the police, which in turn prompted armed action by nationalists and republicans. Increasing chaos and escalating violence led the UK government to deploy the British Army on the streets of Northern Ireland in 1969 and to impose direct rule from London in 1972 (between 1921 and 1972, Northern Ireland had its own regional government).

For years, the UK and Irish governments sought to facilitate a negotiated political settlement to the conflict. Multiparty talks began in June 1996, led by former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, who was serving as U.S. President Bill Clinton's special adviser on Ireland. The UK and Irish governments and the Northern Ireland political parties participating in the peace talks announced an agreement on April 10, 1998. This accord became known as the Good Friday Agreement (for the day on which it was concluded); it is also known as the Belfast Agreement.[4]

Despite the significant decrease in the levels of violence since the Good Friday Agreement, implementation of the peace accord proved challenging. Tensions and distrust persist among Northern Ireland's political parties and between the unionist and nationalist communities more broadly. Northern Ireland continues to grapple with a number of issues in its search for peace and reconciliation. Sectarian differences flare periodically, and addressing Northern Ireland's legacy of violence (often termed *dealing with the past*) is particularly controversial. The UK's withdrawal from the European Union (EU) in 2020—or *Brexit*—has added to divisions within

[1] In 1921, the mostly Catholic, southern part of Ireland won independence from the United Kingdom (UK), resulting in the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 within the British Commonwealth. The Irish government formally declared Ireland a republic in 1948 and severed its remaining constitutional links with the UK. The Republic of Ireland, with a population of roughly 4.9 million, consists of 26 counties and encompasses about five-sixths of the island of Ireland; Northern Ireland, with approximately 1.9 million people, comprises six counties and encompasses the remaining one-sixth of the island.

[2] Many unionists and loyalists refer to the six counties that today make up Northern Ireland as *Ulster*. Technically and historically, Ulster also includes the three northernmost counties of the Republic of Ireland.

[3] Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency Census 2021, "Main Statistics for Northern Ireland: Religion," Statistical Bulletin, September 22, 2022, at https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/census-2021-main-statistics-for-northern-ireland-phase-1-statistical-bulletin-religion.pdf.

[4] The text of the Good Friday Agreement (or Belfast Agreement) may be found at http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/docs//agreement.htm. The unionist/Protestant community tends to use the term Belfast Agreement, viewing the name Good Friday Agreement as biased in favor of the nationalist/Catholic community. For the purposes of this report, the peace accord is referred to as the Good Friday Agreement, because this is the name more widely used and recognized in the United States.

Northern Ireland, renewed questions about Northern Ireland's constitutional status as part of the UK, and contributed to political instability in the power-sharing institutions. In late January 2024, Northern Ireland's leading unionist party accepted new measures proposed by the UK government to address certain Brexit-related concerns, thereby enabling Northern Ireland's devolved government to be restored in early February 2024 after a two-year suspension.

Successive U.S. Administrations and many Members of Congress have supported the Northern Ireland peace process and have encouraged full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, as well as subsequent accords and initiatives. The United States has provided aid through the International Fund for Ireland (IFI), which was created in 1986 to encourage economic development and foster reconciliation. Some Members of Congress have been particularly interested in police reforms and human rights in Northern Ireland. Some Members of Congress also have demonstrated an interest in Brexit's implications for Northern Ireland.

Figure 1. Map of Northern Ireland (UK) and the Republic of Ireland

Source: Graphic created by CRS using data from Esri (2017).

The 1998 Peace Agreement

Key Elements

The Good Friday Agreement is a multilayered and interlocking document, consisting of a political settlement reached by Northern Ireland's political parties and an international treaty between the UK and Irish governments. At the core of the Good Friday Agreement is the *consent principle*—that is, a change in Northern Ireland's status can come about only with the consent of the majority of Northern Ireland's people, as well as with the consent of a majority in Ireland. Although the

agreement acknowledged that a substantial section of Northern Ireland's population and a majority on the island desired a united Ireland, it recognized that the majority of people in Northern Ireland wished to remain part of the UK. If the preference of this majority were to change, the agreement asserted that the UK and Irish governments would have a binding obligation to bring about the wish of the people; thus, the agreement included provisions for future polls to be held in Northern Ireland on its constitutional status, should events warrant.

The Good Friday Agreement set out a framework for devolved government—the transfer of specified powers over local governance from London to Belfast—and called for establishing a Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive in which unionist and nationalist parties would share power (known as *Strand One*). The Good Friday Agreement also contained provisions on several issues viewed as central to the peace process: decommissioning (disarmament) of paramilitary weapons, policing, human rights, UK security normalization (demilitarization), and the status of prisoners. Negotiations on many of these areas had been extremely contentious, and the final agreed text thus reflected some degree of "constructive ambiguity."

In addition, the Good Friday Agreement created new "North-South" and "East-West" institutions (*Strand Two* and *Strand Three*, respectively). Among the key institutions called for in these two strands, a North-South Ministerial Council was established to allow leaders in the northern and southern parts of the island of Ireland to consult and cooperate on cross-border issues. A British-Irish Council also was formed to discuss matters of regional interest; the council comprises representatives of the two governments and the devolved administrations of Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, the Channel Islands, and the Isle of Man.

Implementation

Voters in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland approved the Good Friday Agreement in separate referendums on May 22, 1998, but implementing the agreement was difficult. For years, decommissioning and police reforms were key sticking points that contributed to instability in Northern Ireland's devolved government. Ongoing sectarian strife and sporadic violence from dissident republican and loyalist groups that refused to accept the peace process also fed mistrust between the unionist and nationalist communities and their respective political parties.

Democratic Power-Sharing Institutions

As noted above, the Good Friday Agreement mandated power-sharing in the devolved government between unionists and nationalists and called for establishing a new Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive. To ensure neither unionists nor nationalists could dominate the Assembly (of 108 members at the time), the agreement required that "key decisions" receive cross-community support (i.e., from a majority of both unionist and nationalist Assembly members). The Executive would be composed of a first minister, deputy first minister, and other ministers with departmental responsibilities (e.g., health, education, jobs); positions would be allocated to political parties according to party strength in the Assembly.

The first elections to the new Northern Ireland Assembly took place on June 25, 1998. The devolution of power from London to Belfast, however, was delayed by unionist concerns about the status of weapons decommissioning. Following 18 months of further negotiations, authority over local affairs was transferred to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive in December 1999. Over the next few years, the issue of decommissioning—especially by the Irish Republican Army (IRA)—contributed to the suspension of the devolved government and the reinstatement of direct rule from London several times between 2000 and 2002. (See "Decommissioning," below.)

In May 2007, after a nearly five-year suspension, Northern Ireland's devolved government was restored following a landmark deal between the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)—which strongly supports Northern Ireland's continued integration as part of the UK—and Sinn Fein, the staunchly nationalist political party traditionally associated with the IRA. Regularly scheduled Assembly elections in 2011 and 2016 produced successive power-sharing governments, also led by the DUP and Sinn Fein. At the same time, various incidents—including protests in 2012 and 2013 over the use of flags and emblems and the 2015 arrest of a Sinn Fein leader in connection with the murder of a former IRA member—periodically threatened the devolved government's stability. Brexit and other contentious issues led to the collapse of the power-sharing institutions between 2017 and 2020, and again between February 2022 and February 2024 (see "Political Developments since 2016").

Decommissioning

For years, decommissioning of paramilitary weapons was a prominent challenge in the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. The text of the agreement states, "those who hold office should use only democratic, non-violent means, and those who do not should be excluded or removed from office." Unionists were adamant that the IRA must fully decommission its weapons. The IRA had been observing a cease-fire since 1997, but it viewed decommissioning as tantamount to surrender and had long resisted such calls.

Progress toward full IRA decommissioning was slow and incremental. A key milestone came in July 2005, when the IRA declared an end to its armed campaign and instructed all members to pursue objectives through "exclusively peaceful means."[5] In September 2005, Northern Ireland's Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) announced that the IRA had put all of its arms "beyond use," asserting that the IRA weaponry dismantled or made inoperable matched estimates provided by the security forces.[6] The IICD also confirmed decommissioning by other republican groups and loyalist organizations. The IICD concluded its work in 2011.

Policing

Although recognized as a central element in achieving a comprehensive peace in Northern Ireland, new policing structures and arrangements were a frequent point of contention between unionists and nationalists. In 2001, a new Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) was established to replace the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), Northern Ireland's former, 92% Protestant police force. Catholics viewed the RUC as an enforcer of Protestant domination, and human rights organizations accused the RUC of brutality and collusion with loyalist paramilitary groups. Defenders of the RUC pointed to its tradition of loyalty and discipline and its record in fighting terrorism. In accordance with policing recommendations made by an independent commission (known as the Patten Commission), increasing the proportion of Catholic officers (from 8% to 30% in 10 years) was a key goal for the new PSNI. To help fulfill this goal, the PSNI introduced a 50-50 Catholic/Protestant recruitment process.[7]

For several years, Sinn Fein refused to participate in the Policing Board, a democratic oversight body established as part of the police reforms. Many viewed Sinn Fein's stance as discouraging Catholics from joining the PSNI and preventing the nationalist community from fully accepting the new PSNI. In 2007, however, Sinn Fein members voted to support the police and join the

[5] "IRA Statement in Full," BBC News, July 25, 2005.

[6] Mark Davenport, "IRA Arms: What Next for NI Politics?," BBC News, September 26, 2005.

[7] See *A New Beginning: Policing in Northern Ireland*, Report of the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland, September 1999, at http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/police/patten/patten99.pdf.

Policing Board. Sinn Fein's decision was seen as historic, given the IRA's traditional view of the police as a legitimate target. In 2010, the DUP and Sinn Fein reached an accord (the Hillsborough Agreement) to devolve policing and justice powers from London to Belfast. The 50-50 recruitment process for Catholic and Protestant PSNI officers concluded in 2011.

According to the most recent data available, Catholic officers currently make up around 33% of the PSNI's roughly 6,300 officers.[8] Concerns persist that not enough Catholics are seeking to join the PSNI (due to both lingering suspicions about the police within the Catholic/nationalist community and ongoing fears that Catholic police recruits may be targeted by dissident republicans opposed to the peace process). Budget constraints and other issues, including low morale, also are impacting recruitment. PSNI officials have warned that current overall staffing levels are insufficient. In September 2024, the PSNI outlined a plan to increase the size of the force to 7,000 officers by 2028.[9]

Security Normalization

The Good Friday Agreement called for "as early a return as possible to normal security arrangements in Northern Ireland," including the removal of security installations. In February 2007, the last of more than 100 armored watchtowers in Northern Ireland was dismantled. In July 2007, the British Army ended its 38-year-long military operation in Northern Ireland. Although a regular garrison of 5,000 British troops remains based in Northern Ireland, British forces no longer have a role in policing and may be deployed worldwide.

Rights, Safeguards, and Equality of Opportunity

In accordance with the Good Friday Agreement's provisions related to human rights and equality, the UK government incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR, an international treaty of the Council of Europe[10]) into Northern Ireland law and established a Human Rights Commission and an Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. Some nationalists have continued to press for more progress and have argued that Northern Ireland needs its own Bill of Rights. Consideration for a Bill of Rights was provided for in the Good Friday Agreement, but the issue has long been controversial. Consensus on the way forward—between unionists and nationalists, as well as with the UK government—remains elusive.

The Good Friday Agreement also calls for tolerance of linguistic diversity in Northern Ireland and support for the Irish language (Gaelic). Giving Gaelic the same official status as English and calls for a stand-alone Irish Language Act in Northern Ireland, however, were sensitive issues for many unionists. A 2020 deal to restore the power-sharing institutions included a compromise to recognize Gaelic as an official language in Northern Ireland and promote its use while also protecting the Ulster-Scots language (a regional language similar to English that many unionists consider important to their heritage). In October 2022, the UK Parliament approved legislation enacting the language and cultural measures agreed in 2020 into law.[11]

[8] Police Service of Northern Ireland, see *Strength of Police Service Statistics* and *Workforce Composition Statistics*, both updated regularly, available at https://www.psni.police.uk/about-us/our-publications-and-reports/our-publication-scheme/who-we-are-and-what-we-do.

[9] Julian O'Neill, "PSNI Numbers at Watershed Moment—Chief Constable," BBC News, September 17, 2024; Rebecca Black, "NI Chief Constable Concerned over Lack of Catholics Applying to Join Police," *Independent*, February 11, 2025.

[10] The UK is a party to the ECHR as a member of the Council of Europe, a leading European human rights body that the UK helped found in 1949. The Council of Europe is an entirely separate organization from the EU.

[11] The Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 received royal assent in December 2022.

Initiatives to Further the Peace Process

Many analysts view implementation of the most important aspects of the Good Friday Agreement as complete. Between 2013 and 2015, the Northern Ireland political parties and the UK and Irish governments made several attempts to reduce sectarian tensions and promote reconciliation. Major endeavors included the following:

- **The 2013 Haass Initiative.** In 2013, the Northern Ireland Executive appointed former U.S. diplomat and special envoy for Northern Ireland Richard Haass as the independent chair of interparty talks aimed at tackling some of the most divisive issues in Northern Ireland society.[12] In particular, Haass was tasked with making recommendations on dealing with the past and the sectarian issues of parading, protests, and the use of flags and emblems. In December 2013, Haass released a draft proposal outlining the way forward in these areas, but he was unable to broker a final agreement among the Northern Ireland political parties.[13]
- **The 2014 Stormont House Agreement.** In 2014, financial pressures and budgetary disputes related to UK-wide welfare reforms and austerity measures tested Northern Ireland's devolved government. The UK and Irish governments convened interparty talks to address government finances and governing structures, as well as the issues previously tackled by the Haass initiative. In the resulting December 2014 Stormont House Agreement, the Northern Ireland political parties agreed to support welfare reform (with certain mitigating measures), balance the budget, address Northern Ireland's heavy reliance on the public sector, and reduce the size of the Assembly and the number of Executive departments to improve efficiency and cut costs. The agreement also included measures on parading, flags, and dealing with the past. Disagreements over welfare reform between the DUP and Sinn Fein, however, stalled implementation of all aspects of the Stormont House Agreement.[14]
- **The 2015 Fresh Start Agreement.** In November 2015, the UK and Irish governments, the DUP, and Sinn Fein reached a new Fresh Start Agreement. Like the Stormont House Agreement, the accord focused on implementing welfare reform and improving the stability and sustainability of Northern Ireland's budget and governing institutions. It confirmed a reduction in the size of the Assembly from 108 to 90 members (effective from the first Assembly election after the May 2016 election), decreased the number of Executive departments, and made provision for an official opposition in the Assembly. The Fresh Start Agreement also included provisions on parading and the use of flags, but the parties were unable to reach final agreement on establishing new institutions to deal with the past. In addition, the Fresh Start Agreement addressed ongoing concerns about paramilitary activity, sparked by the arrest of a senior Sinn Fein official in connection to the August 2015 murder of an ex-IRA member.[15]

[12] Richard Haass served as President George W. Bush's special envoy for Northern Ireland from 2001 to 2003.

[13] For the full text of the December 31, 2013, draft agreement presented by Haass and his negotiating team, see https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/publications/haass-report-proposed-agreement.

[14] The 2014 Stormont House Agreement is available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-stormont-house-agreement.

[15] The Fresh Start Agreement is available at Government of the UK, "News Story: A Fresh Start for Northern Ireland," November 17, 2015, at https://www.gov.uk/government/news/a-fresh-start-for-northern-ireland.

Political Developments Since 2016

Despite a much-improved security situation since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, political challenges persist and community relations remain fragile. As noted previously, regularly scheduled Assembly elections were held in May 2016 and the DUP and Sinn Fein subsequently formed a power-sharing government. In January 2017, this devolved government collapsed amid a scandal over a renewable energy program, differences between the DUP and Sinn Fein on a potential Irish Language Act and the legalization of same-sex marriage (Sinn Fein supported both measures, whereas the DUP opposed them), and unease in Northern Ireland over Brexit in the wake of the June 2016 UK referendum on EU membership. Snap Assembly elections were held in March 2017. It took nearly three years—until January 2020—to reestablish the devolved government, led at the time by then-First Minister Arlene Foster of the DUP and then-Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill of Sinn Fein.[16]

In the last five years, Northern Ireland officials have been tested by the COVID-19 pandemic and by challenges resulting from the implementation of the post-Brexit trade and customs rules for Northern Ireland, aimed at preserving an open border on the island of Ireland while also respecting the rules of the EU single market and customs union. Initially set out in a protocol to the UK's withdrawal agreement with the EU, many unionists viewed these post-Brexit arrangements as dividing Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK (i.e., Great Britain) and endangering the UK's constitutional integrity. Implementation of the protocol—which began in January 2021—led to some trade disruptions between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK and contributed to heightened tensions. (See "Implications of Brexit," below.)

Amid other demographic, political, and societal changes in Northern Ireland, the post-Brexit arrangements in the protocol exacerbated unionist concerns about their British identity being under threat and may have been a factor in the violence and rioting that erupted in several cities and towns across Northern Ireland in late March and early April 2021. Much of this rioting was carried out by young people and was concentrated in economically disadvantaged communities where criminal gangs linked to loyalist paramilitaries have considerable influence. The violence also followed a decision in late March 2021 against prosecuting violations of COVID-19 social distancing restrictions at a large funeral in 2020 for a former high-ranking IRA official. For many unionists, this incident at the 2020 funeral reinforced their views of a double standard in the PSNI and the judiciary in favor of nationalists. Frustration and boredom due to the COVID-19 lockdowns, especially among young people, also may have factored into the rioting.[17]

Although the DUP backed Brexit (it was the only major Northern Ireland political party to do so), implementation of the post-Brexit arrangements for Northern Ireland prompted political turmoil within the DUP in 2021. Arlene Foster stepped down as DUP party leader in late May 2021 and as first minister in June 2021. Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, a DUP member of the UK Parliament at the time, became leader of the DUP in late June 2021, the DUP's second new leader in a month (Donaldson resigned as DUP leader in late March 2024, and Gavin Robinson became the DUP's

[16] Northern Ireland's devolved government was restored in 2020 following a power-sharing deal that addressed a number of key issues, including health, education, language and cultural issues, and the sustainability of Northern Ireland's political institutions. Government of the UK, *New Decade, New Approach*, January 9, 2020, available at https://www.gov.uk/government/news/deal-to-see-restored-government-in-northern-ireland-tomorrow.

[17] Shawn Pogatchnik, "Northern Ireland 'Playing with Matches' amid Brexit Trade Deal Tensions," *Politico*, April 7, 2021; Stephen Castle, "Northern Ireland Sees Spasm of Violence as Old Tensions Resurface," *New York Times*, April 8, 2021; Dan Haverty, "How Brexit Lit the Fuse in Northern Ireland," *Foreign Policy*, April 13, 2021.

new leader).[18] Paul Givan, a DUP member of the Northern Ireland Assembly, succeeded Foster as first minister in June 2021.

In February 2022, then-First Minister Givan resigned to protest the Northern Ireland protocol and the slow progress in UK-EU negotiations on resolving difficulties with the protocol. Givan's resignation also forced then-Deputy First Minister O'Neill to step down. The first minister and deputy first minister positions are considered a joint office; if one resigns, the other also ceases to hold office. As a result, the Northern Ireland Executive was unable to meet or make decisions (the Northern Ireland Assembly was able to continue working on legislation already in progress).[19]

The May 2022 Assembly Election

Regularly scheduled Assembly elections were held on May 5, 2022. For the first time in Northern Ireland's history, Sinn Fein won the largest number of seats in the 90-member Assembly and surpassed the DUP as the largest party in the Assembly (see **Table 1**). Decreased support for the DUP appeared to be driven by dissatisfaction with the party's leadership on Brexit and internal party divisions. Sinn Fein strongly supports a united Ireland but centered its election campaign on everyday concerns, such as the rising costs of living and health care. The smaller, cross-community Alliance Party made significant gains, attributed to voter frustration with Northern Ireland's identity politics and frequent instability in the power-sharing institutions.[20] Voter turnout was 63%. (Also see text box, "Main Political Parties in Northern Ireland," below.)

Table 1. Northern Ireland 2022 Election Results

Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs)

Political Party	# of Seats	+/- Seats
Sinn Fein (SF; hard-line nationalist, left-wing)	27	—
Democratic Unionist Party (DUP; hard-line unionist, conservative)	25	-3
Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI; nonsectarian, centrist/liberal)	17	+9
Ulster Unionist Party (UUP; moderate unionist, center-right)	9	-1
Social Democratic and Labor Party (SDLP; moderate nationalist, center-left)	8	-4
Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV; hard-line unionist, right-wing)	1	—
People Before Profit Alliance (PBPA; nonsectarian, left-wing)	1	—
Independent (unionist)	2	+1

Source: BBC News, "Northern Ireland Assembly Election Results 2022," at https://www.bbc.com/news/election/2022/northern-ireland/results.

Following the May 2022 election, the DUP blocked the work of the Assembly and the formation of a new Executive to exert pressure on the UK government to address unionist objections to the post-Brexit arrangements in the Northern Ireland protocol. Sinn Fein and other nationalists

[18] Donaldson resigned as DUP leader in late March 2024 after being arrested and charged with 18 sexual assault offenses, which allegedly occurred between 1985 and 2008. See, Julian O'Neill, "Donaldson Pleads Not Guilty to Sexual Offence Charges," BBC News, September 10, 2024.

[19] Jayne McCormack, "Givan Resignation Triggers Fresh Political Crisis in NI," BBC News, February 3, 2022.

[20] Jill Lawless and Peter Morrison, "Sinn Fein Eyes Historic Win in Northern Ireland Election," AP News, May 4, 2022; Mark Landler, "As Britain Turned Away from EU, Northern Ireland Turned to Sinn Fein," *New York Times,* May 7, 2022; Mark Devenport, "How Alliance Number Nerds Turned Single Digits into a Surge," BBC News, May 9, 2022.

generally supported the protocol's post-Brexit arrangements as necessary to maintain an open border on the island of Ireland. In late February 2023, the UK and the EU announced a new agreement—known as the Windsor Framework—to resolve the challenges posed by the Northern Ireland protocol. The DUP, however, asserted that the Windsor Framework did not fully address the party's concerns about the protocol and that further progress would be necessary before the DUP would agree to reestablish Northern Ireland's devolved government. (See "Implications of Brexit" and "The Windsor Framework," below.)

Main Political Parties in Northern Ireland

Sinn Fein. Sinn Fein has been the largest nationalist party in Northern Ireland since 2003. It advocates for a united Ireland. Sinn Fein is an all-island party and has a political presence in Northern Ireland and Ireland (with members in both the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Irish Parliament). Historically, Sinn Fein was the political party associated with the Irish Republican Army (IRA). A left-wing party, Sinn Fein traditionally has received considerable support from working-class Catholics. Mary Lou McDonald has led Sinn Fein since 2018. Michelle O'Neill has led Sinn Fein in the Northern Ireland Assembly since 2017; she is also the party's deputy leader.

Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). The DUP has been the largest unionist party in Northern Ireland since 2003. It enjoys considerable Protestant support and strongly favors union with the United Kingdom (UK). The party initially opposed the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, viewing virtually any compromise with Irish nationalists as a net loss for unionists. Socially conservative, the DUP opposes abortion and same-sex marriage. Gavin Robinson has led the DUP since late March 2024 (he initially served in an interim capacity and was confirmed as party leader in May 2024).

Alliance Party. The Alliance Party is a nonsectarian, cross-community party that is centrist and liberal in political orientation. It argues for reforming the devolved government's power-sharing rules to promote greater stability and reflect growing support for nonsectarian parties. The Alliance Party has been led by Naomi Long since 2016.

Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). The UUP is a smaller, center-right Protestant party that supports union with the UK. It was the lead unionist party involved in the negotiations on the Good Friday Agreement. Mike Nesbitt has led the UUP since August 2024.

Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). The SDLP is a smaller, center-left Catholic party that supports a united Ireland achieved through peaceful means. It was the lead nationalist party involved in the negotiations on the Good Friday Agreement. Claire Hanna has led the SDLP since October 2024.

2024 Reestablishment of the Devolved Government

Following the February 2023 Windsor Framework, the UK government sought to address the DUP's remaining concerns about the post-Brexit arrangements for Northern Ireland and facilitate the establishment of a new devolved government. In late January 2024, the DUP accepted a package of measures proposed by the UK government—set out in a new *Safeguarding the Union* command paper—that outlined some operational changes to the Windsor Framework to ease trade further between Northern Ireland and Great Britain and reassure unionists of Northern Ireland's place within the UK.[21] Despite some concerns among several DUP party officials about the command paper and accompanying implementing legislation, the DUP decided to end its boycott of Northern Ireland's power-sharing institutions and enter into a new devolved government.[22] (See "Implications of Brexit" and "The 2024 UK-DUP Deal," below.)

Northern Ireland's Assembly and new Executive began work on February 3, 2024. For the first time in Northern Ireland's history, the position of first minister is now held by a Sinn Fein

[21] In the UK, *command papers* are official publications that present major government initiatives to Parliament "by command" of the sovereign. See UK Parliament, "About Command Papers," at https://www.parliament.uk/about/how/publications/government/.

[22] Shawn Pogatchnik, "DUP Agrees to Drop Boycott of Northern Ireland Power-Sharing," *Politico*, January 30, 2024; Jayne McCormack and Finn Purdy, "Stormont: Assembly to Sit on Saturday as DUP Boycott Ends," BBC News, February 1, 2024.

member, Michelle O'Neill. Sinn Fein was entitled to the position of first minister because it won the largest number of Assembly seats in the May 2022 election, although the roles of first minister and deputy minister are equal. DUP Assembly member Emma Little-Pengelly assumed the role of deputy first minister. Both First Minister O'Neill and Deputy First Minister Little-Pengelly pledged to serve "all" people and communities in Northern Ireland.[23]

As part of the deal to restore the devolved government, the UK government agreed to provide a £3.3 billion (about $4.2 billion) financial package for Northern Ireland to help address budgetary pressures (due in part to the delay in reestablishing the devolved government). Funding priorities included increasing public sector pay amid high inflation and recent large-scale strikes (by health care and transportation workers, teachers, civil servants, and others), improving infrastructure, and enhancing investment. The UK government also recommitted to devolving corporate tax powers to Northern Ireland's power-sharing institutions, which would allow Northern Ireland to set a lower corporate tax rate than the UK rate (of 25%) to compete more effectively with the lower corporate tax rate in the Republic of Ireland.[24]

Ongoing Challenges in the Peace Process

More than 25 years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, the past remains ever-present in Northern Ireland and the search for peace and reconciliation remains challenging. Difficult issues include bridging sectarian divisions and managing key sticking points (especially parading, protests, and the use of flags and emblems), dealing with Northern Ireland's legacy of violence, addressing remaining paramilitary concerns and curbing dissident activity, and furthering economic development and equality.

Sectarian Divisions

Northern Ireland remains a largely divided society, with Protestant and Catholic communities existing largely in parallel. Schools and housing developments in Northern Ireland remain mostly single-identity communities. In March 2022, the Northern Ireland Assembly passed legislation to increase the number of integrated school places and establish targets for the number of children educated in integrated schools.[25] For the 2024-2025 academic year, out of roughly 1,100 nursery, primary, and post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, there were 73 formally integrated schools, educating about 8% of pupils.[26]

In some areas in Northern Ireland, *peace walls* separate Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods. Estimates of the number of peace walls vary depending on the definition. Northern Ireland's Departments of Justice and Housing have responsibility for around 60 peace walls; when other types of structures are included—such as fences, gates, and closed roads—the number of physical

[23] Brendan Hughes and Matt Fox, "Stormont: Michelle O'Neill Makes History as Nationalist First Minister," BBC News, February 3, 2024; William Booth and Amanda Ferguson, "Northern Ireland Gets Its First Sinn Fein First Minister in Historic Shift," *Washington Post*, February 3, 2024.

[24] Margaret Canning, "Northern Ireland Businesses Welcome Prospect of Corporation Tax Devolution Contained in DUP Deal," *Belfast Telegraph*, January 31, 2024; Northern Ireland Office, "UK Government Confirms £3.3bn Spending Settlement for Restored Northern Ireland Executive," press release, February 13, 2024.

[25] Robbie Meredith, "Integrated Education: Stormont Passes Bill Despite DUP Opposition," BBC News, March 9, 2022.

[26] Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, "Annual Enrolments at Schools and in Funded Pre-School Education in Northern Ireland, 2024-25," February 27, 2025, see in particular Tables 1b and 2a, at https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/DEstatistics/annual-enrolments-schools-and-funded-pre-school-education-northern-ireland-202425.html.

barriers separating Protestant and Catholic communities is estimated at over 100.[27] Northern Ireland's Executive has been working to remove the peace walls since 2013. Surveys of public attitudes indicate support for the walls remains in some communities.[28] One poll conducted in 2019 found that 42% of those interviewed wanted the walls to remain in place for reasons of safety and security. The same survey also found that 37% of respondents had never interacted with anyone from the community living on the other side of the nearest peace wall.[29] Another 2019 survey and subsequent reporting suggests a gradual attitudinal change in support of removing the peace walls and other barriers, especially among younger people.[30]

Sectarian divisions are often apparent during the annual summer *marching season*, when many unionist cultural and religious organizations hold parades commemorating Protestant history. Although the vast majority of these annual parades are not contentious, some are held through or close to areas populated mainly by Catholics (some of whom perceive such unionist parades as triumphalist and intimidating). During the Troubles, the marching season often provoked fierce violence. Many Protestant organizations view the existing Parades Commission, which arbitrates disputes over parade routes, as largely biased in favor of Catholics and have repeatedly argued for abolishing the commission.[31] Efforts over the years to address the contentious issue of parading and related protests have stalled repeatedly.

Sectarian tensions also are evident in relation to the use of flags and emblems in Northern Ireland. A series of protests in late 2012 and early 2013 following a decision to fly the union (UK) flag at Belfast City Hall only on designated days (rather than year-round) highlighted frictions on such issues between the unionist and nationalist communities. In 2016, a Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture, and Tradition was established to assess these issues and to recommend policies and solutions to help address them. After several delays, the commission's report was published in late 2021. The report contains over 40 recommendations, but the commission was unable to reach agreement on some key issues, including related to flags and memorials. Critics questioned the report's value given the delays, costs (£800,000, or about $1.1 million), and lack of an accompanying implementation plan.[32]

Dealing with the Past

Fully addressing Northern Ireland's legacy of violence and pursuing justice for crimes committed during the Troubles has been difficult and often contentious. Reaching consensus on the best way to deal with the past is challenging in large part because many unionists and nationalists continue to view the Troubles differently and retain competing narratives. Cases of suspected collusion between UK security institutions, Northern Ireland's former police force, and paramilitary organizations active during the Troubles have been particularly difficult to resolve.

[27] Rory Carroll, "Belfast's Peace Walls: Potent Symbols of Division Are Dwindling—But Slowly," *Guardian,* April 7, 2023; "What Is a Peace Wall? An Explainer," *Irish News,* July 27, 2023.

[28] Julian O'Neill, "NI Troubles: I Would Love to See That Wall Coming Down," BBC News, January 29, 2023; Rebecca Black, "Progress Continues to Be Made in Bid to Transform Northern Ireland's Peace Walls," *Irish News,* December 31, 2023.

[29] Northern Ireland Department of Justice, *Public Attitudes to Peace Walls 2019 Findings,* June 2020.

[30] International Fund for Ireland, *Peace Walls Programme Attitudinal Survey: Summary of Results*, November 2019; Niall McCracken, "Divided by a Peace Wall, United Through Friendship," BBC News, August 3, 2023.

[31] The Parades Commission was established in 1998 as an independent body to rule on disputed parades.

[32] Jayne McCormack, "Flags Report: Stormont Publishes £800k Report Without Action Plan," BBC News, December 1, 2021; Northern Ireland Executive Office, *Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition – Final Report,* December 1, 2021.

The Good Friday Agreement asserted that, "it is essential to acknowledge and address the suffering of the victims of violence as a necessary element of reconciliation." In 2008, the Northern Ireland Assembly established a Commission for Victims and Survivors to support victims and their families. Several legal processes for examining crimes stemming from the Troubles also have existed. These included investigations into conflict-related deaths by a dedicated PSNI unit; investigations by the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland (PONI) of historical cases involving allegations of police misconduct; fact-finding coroner inquests; and public inquiries, such as the Saville inquiry (concluded in 2010) into the January 1972 Bloody Sunday incident in which the British Army shot 28 people, resulting in 14 deaths.[33] Since 2016, an independent police team—known as Operation Kenova—also has investigated several cases of suspected collusion during the Troubles.

Critics argue these various legal processes have represented a piecemeal approach and have given some deaths or incidents priority over others. Observers note that progress in investigations has been slow and has resulted in few prosecutions. According to the latest publicly available information, as of mid-2022, over 900 conflict-related cases (involving nearly 1,200 deaths) were awaiting investigation by the PSNI.[34] UK authorities report that between 2015 and 2021, historical reviews and investigations resulted in prosecutions of nine people for Troubles-related deaths.[35] Troubles-era criminal prosecutions have faced legal hurdles as the passage of time has, in some cases, diminished the quality of evidence. Some experts also point out the expense and time involved with some of these processes; for example, the Saville inquiry into Bloody Sunday cost £195 million (more than $300 million) and took 12 years to complete.[36]

The issue of prosecuting former British soldiers who served in Northern Ireland during the Troubles also has posed challenges. UK veterans groups and some Members of Parliament argue that Troubles-related investigations and prosecutions have disproportionately focused on the actions of the armed forces and former police officers. They note that PSNI investigations involving the British Army accounted for 30% of its legacy case workload but that the Army was responsible for 10% of the overall deaths during the conflict.[37]

Other officials and analysts reject arguments that legacy investigations and prosecutions have predominantly targeted veterans. Between 2011 and 2019, Northern Ireland's Public Prosecution Service (PPS) undertook prosecutions in eight legacy cases involving republican paramilitaries, four cases involving loyalist paramilitaries, and five cases involving former military personnel.[38] Several prosecutions of former British soldiers have collapsed in recent years.[39] Since the 1998 peace agreement, the only conviction of a member of the armed forces for a Troubles-related offense occurred in November 2022, when a Northern Ireland court convicted a British Army

[33] Thirteen deaths occurred on Bloody Sunday; another person wounded on Bloody Sunday died several months later.

[34] Government of the UK, *Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill Explanatory Notes*, May 17, 2022, p. 6, at https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-03/0010/en/220010en.pdf.

[35] Government of the UK, *Addressing the Legacy of Northern Ireland's Past*, July 14, 2021, p. 20, at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/addressing-the-legacy-of-northern-irelands-past.

[36] James Clarke, "Was the Bloody Sunday Report Value for Money?," BBC News, June 14, 2010.

[37] Claire Mills and David Torrance, *Investigation of Former Armed Forces Personnel Who Served in Northern Ireland*, UK House of Commons Library, May 18, 2022, pp. 20-21.

[38] Ibid., pp. 29-30. Also see, Edward Burke, "The Trouble with Northern Ireland Legacy Cases," Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), April 22, 2021.

[39] David Young, "Trial of British Army Veterans Accused of Official IRA Leader's Murder Collapses," *Irish Times*, May 4, 2021; Mike McBride, "Prosecutors Drop Troubles Cases Against Ex-Soldiers," BBC News, July 2, 2021.

veteran of manslaughter for killing a civilian in 1988.[40] In February 2024, the PPS announced that four British Army veterans would be prosecuted for murder or attempted murder in two incidents that occurred in Belfast in May 1972. The only other prosecution of a former British soldier for Troubles-related offenses currently underway is that against "Soldier F" for two of the 1972 Bloody Sunday killings and for attempted murder of five others wounded on Bloody Sunday.[41]

Stormont House Agreement Provisions

The 2014 Stormont House Agreement called for establishing four new bodies to address "legacy issues" (based largely on proposals made during the 2013 Haass initiative). These bodies were to include a new Historical Investigation Unit (HIU) to take forward the work of the PSNI and PONI in investigating outstanding cases related to the Troubles and a new Independent Commission for Information Retrieval to enable victims and survivors to seek and privately receive information about conflict-related violence (separate from the judicial process). The Stormont House Agreement also provided for establishing an oral history archive and an Implementation and Reconciliation Group to promote reconciliation and reduce sectarianism.[42]

Efforts to enact these legacy mechanisms in UK law, however, stalled for years amid differences between the UK government and various stakeholders on certain aspects of how these bodies would function. In particular, some nationalists and human rights advocates objected to the UK government's insistence on proposed "national security caveats" pertaining to the disclosure of sensitive or classified information. Unionists voiced concern that the proposed HIU could unfairly target former soldiers and police officers. Successive government crises also impeded work on implementing these mechanisms to address Northern Ireland's legacy of violence.[43]

The Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023

As part of the 2020 agreement to reestablish Northern Ireland's power-sharing institutions, the UK government of then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson pledged to introduce legislation to set up the legacy bodies proposed in the 2014 Stormont House Agreement. In March 2020 and subsequently in July 2021, however, the UK government outlined new proposals to address Northern Ireland's past, including changes to the legacy mechanisms called for in the Stormont House Agreement. These proposals informed the government's decision to introduce the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill in the UK Parliament in May 2022. UK officials argued that the new approach set out in the bill would prioritize information recovery for victims and families, protect military veterans from prosecution, and encourage wider societal reconciliation.[44]

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[40] Rory Carroll, "Ex-Soldier Who Shot Dead Civilian During Troubles Convicted of Manslaughter," *Guardian*, November 25, 2022; BBC News, "Aidan McAnespie Killing: Ex-Soldier David Holden Withdraws Appeal," November 7, 2023.

[41] James Crisp, "Four More Troubles Veterans Prosecuted as Cases 'Rushed Through' Before Amnesty Deadline," *Telegraph*, February 8, 2024; Chris Page, "Bloody Sunday Murder Accused to Stand Trial in September" BBC News, February 18, 2025.

[42] The 2014 Stormont House Agreement is available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-stormont-house-agreement.

[43] Anne Cadwallader, "Bereaved Families Have a Right to the Truth," *Irish Times*, December 31, 2015; "Villiers Meets U.S. Lawyers in Bid to Resolve National Security Veto Dispute," *Belfast Telegraph*, February 17, 2016; Gareth Gordon, "Troubles Legacy Consultation Launched by Government," BBC News, May 11, 2018.

[44] Government of the UK, "Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to Outline Way Forward to Address the Legacy of the Troubles," press release, May 17, 2022; UK Parliament, *Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023*, at https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3160.

Despite opposition to the legislation within and outside of Northern Ireland (discussed below), the UK House of Commons passed the bill in July 2022, by a vote of 282 to 217. The bill was supported mostly by the majority Conservative Party. The opposition Labour Party and others voted against the bill; no Members of Parliament from Northern Ireland supported it. In January 2023, the UK government of then-Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (who became Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister in October 2022) introduced several amendments to the bill, largely in response to concerns raised by victims and survivors. Following some delays and resistance in the UK House of Lords, the UK Parliament gave final approval to the bill in September 2023. The bill subsequently received royal assent and became UK law.[45]

Among other measures, the legislation (commonly referred to as the Legacy Act) established a new Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery (ICRIR) charged with reviewing Troubles-related deaths and cases of serious injury. The Legacy Act also established a conditional immunity scheme that would provide immunity from prosecution for Troubles-related offenses for individuals that cooperated with the ICRIR. Furthermore, the act banned criminal investigations into Troubles-related incidents by any UK authority other than the ICRIR, ended most coroner inquests, and prohibited future civil claims for Troubles-related misconduct. The act mandated all investigations to cease, except those in support of prosecutions already underway, by May 1, 2024 (the same day the ICRIR began work).[46]

As noted above, many stakeholders responded negatively to the Legacy Act. Although UK veterans groups largely welcomed the legislation, victims groups and human rights advocates were critical. All Northern Ireland political parties expressed opposition to the legislation.[47] Nationalists contended that ending investigations and most prosecutions would circumvent justice for victims and families and would allow the UK government to cover up the truth about the state's actions during the Troubles. Unionists objected to what they viewed as establishing moral equivalency between the actions of soldiers and paramilitaries. The Irish government also expressed serious concerns about various aspects of the legislation, including "regret" that it departed from the approach envisioned in the 2014 Stormont House Agreement.[48]

Legal experts questioned whether certain provisions, especially those related to investigations and the immunity scheme, were compatible with UK commitments in the European Convention on Human Rights. Victims' groups and families filed several judicial challenges to the Legacy Act in UK courts, and the Irish government filed a case against the act before the ECHR's European Court of Human Rights. In February 2024, the Belfast High Court found that the immunity provisions in the Legacy Act were in breach of the ECHR.[49]

[45] Government of the UK, "Government Tables Amendments to NI Troubles Legacy Legislation," press release, January 17, 2023; BBC News, "Troubles Legacy Bill Enters Law After Receiving Royal Assent," September 19, 2023.

[46] For more information, see Northern Ireland Office, *Explainers Relating to the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill*, May 25, 2022; and Joanna Dawson et al., *Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill 2022-2023*, UK House of Commons Library, July 14, 2023.

[47] See, for example, UK Parliament, Hansard, *Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill*, volume 717, debated on July 4, 2022, at https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-07-04/debates/854CCB3A-19C5-4724-9CF2-A2B02E6D9086/NorthernIrelandTroubles(LegacyAndReconciliation)Bill.

[48] Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, "Ireland Welcomes Decision by Council of Europe on Northern Ireland Legacy Issues," press release, June 10, 2022.

[49] BBC News, "Troubles Legacy: Controversial Bill Facing More Legal Challenges," September 18, 2023; Shawn Pogatchnik, "Ireland to Sue UK over Law Blocking Probes into Northern Irish Violence," *Politico*, December 20, 2023; Megan Specia, "Immunity for Troubles Violence Violates Human Rights, Belfast Court Rules," *New York Times*, February 28, 2024.

In July 2024, a new UK government led by Prime Minister Keir Starmer of the Labour Party took office following parliamentary elections and committed to "repealing and replacing" the Legacy Act.[50] In December 2024, UK Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Hilary Benn began the process of repealing provisions in the Legacy Act related to the conditional immunity scheme and the ban on civil claims by presenting a remedial order for parliamentary approval. The UK government intends to maintain the ICRIR as a body for information recovery and to implement reforms to strengthen its independence. Secretary of State Benn also has announced plans to introduce legislation at a later date to reinstate inquests and to amend some of the Legacy Act's information disclosure provisions. Proposed changes to the information disclosure provisions would seek to respond to a September 2024 Northern Ireland Court of Appeal ruling that the Legacy Act gave the UK government too much discretion over the ICRIR's disclosure of sensitive information. In January 2025, the UK government filed an appeal seeking legal clarity on some aspects of the September 2024 ruling.[51]

Some victims' groups and human rights advocates have expressed concerns that Secretary of State Benn's proposals fall short of fully repealing and replacing the Legacy Act. In particular, those of this view criticize the decision to retain the ICRIR, arguing that the proposed changes to the body would be merely cosmetic. Some victims' advocates also regard the repeal process as too slow, especially as legislation to reinstate inquests has not yet been introduced in parliament. Some veterans' groups continue to support the Legacy Act and oppose plans to repeal it.[52]

Remaining Paramilitary Issues and Dissident Activity

Experts contend the major republican and loyalist paramilitary organizations active during the Troubles are now committed to the political process and remain on cease-fire. In 2015, the UK government commissioned a study on the status of republican and loyalist paramilitary groups. This review found that all the main paramilitary groups that operated during the Troubles still existed, but they remained on cease-fire and the leadership of each group, "to different degrees," was "committed to peaceful means to achieve their political objectives." At the same time, the review concluded that individual members of paramilitary groups continued to represent a threat to national security and public order, including through their involvement in organized crime.[53]

In 2017, a four-member Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) was established to monitor paramilitary activity and report annually on progress toward ending such activity. The UK and Irish governments each named one commissioner to the IRC, and the Northern Ireland Executive

[50] Northern Ireland Office, *Statement from the Secretary of State Following the King's Speech*, July 17, 2024.

[51] Northern Ireland Office, *Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 Statement*, Written Statement to Parliament, July 29, 2024; Northern Ireland Office, *Secretary of State Oral Statement on Northern Ireland Legacy*, Oral Statement to Parliament, December 4, 2024; Northern Ireland Office, *Written Evidence from the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to the UK House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee*, February 12, 2025.

[52] See, for example, BBC News, "Mixed Reaction to Government's Legacy Act Repeal from Victims," December 5, 2024; and Rebecca Black, "British Army Veterans of Northern Ireland Troubles March on Westminster," *London Evening Standard*, February 5, 2025.

[53] Government of the UK, *Independent Report: Assessment on Paramilitary Groups in Northern Ireland*, October 20, 2015. This report focused on the following paramilitary groups: the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF); the Red Hand Commando (RHC); the Ulster Defense Association (UDA, which also conducted attacks during the Troubles under the name of the Ulster Freedom Fighters, or UFF); the South East Antrim (SEA) group of the UDA; Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF); the Irish Republican Army (IRA, also known as the Provisional Irish Republican Army, or PIRA); and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA).

named two.[54] In its seventh annual report, released in February 2025, the IRC stated that, "intimidation, coercive control, and threats linked to paramilitary groups continue to persist and remain a real concern." The IRC noted some progress during 2024, including a lowering of the Northern Ireland terrorism threat level from "severe" to "substantial," but also noted that "a further worrying feature of the situation in 2024 was that there was a paramilitary element involved in a number of racist incidents related to immigration."[55] In recent years, IRC commissioners and other observers also have raised concerns about the degree to which divisions over Brexit could further enhance paramilitary influence.[56]

The IRC supports addressing paramilitarism with an approach that combines policing and criminal justice responses with measures to tackle the underlying socioeconomic challenges facing communities in which paramilitaries operate. The IRC also has argued for considering direct engagement with paramilitaries to promote voluntary disbandment. Other Northern Ireland officials have cautioned that engagement could legitimize paramilitaries; they advocate instead for greater investment in policing and community development.[57]

Security assessments indicate that dissident groups not on cease-fire and opposed to the 1998 peace accord continue to pose threats. Dissident republican groups are regarded as posing the greatest terrorist threat in Northern Ireland but do not have the same capacity to mount a sustained terror campaign as the IRA did between the 1970s and the 1990s. Most of the dissident republican groups are small in comparison to the IRA during the height of the Troubles.[58]

Four main dissident republican groups exist currently: the Continuity IRA (CIRA); Óglaigh na hÉireann (ÓNH); Arm na Poblacht (ANP), and the New IRA (which reportedly was formed in 2012).[59] These groups have sought to target police officers, prison officers, and other members of the security services in particular. Authorities are especially alarmed by the threat posed by the New IRA, which has carried out a string of high-profile attacks in recent years. The New IRA claimed responsibility for shooting and critically wounding a senior and prominent PSNI detective, John Caldwell, in Omagh in February 2023.[60] The New IRA also was responsible for the April 2019 death of journalist Lyra McKee, who was shot while covering riots in Londonderry (also known as Derry).[61] Although less active generally than the New IRA, in March 2023, ANP warned that it would consider the families of PSNI officers to be targets as well.[62]

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[54] The UK government chose former U.S. Special Envoy for Northern Ireland Mitchell Reiss as its representative on the IRC. Reiss served as special envoy in the George W. Bush Administration from 2003 to 2007.

[55] *Independent Reporting Commission Seventh Report*, February 25, 2025, at https://www.ircommission.org/publications/irc-seventh-report.

[56] Shawn Pogatchnik, "Who Are the Northern Ireland Loyalists Threatening to Shun Peace Deal over Brexit Fears?," *Politico*, March 5, 2021; Julian O'Neill, "NI Protocol: Warning Over Loyalist Paramilitaries Gaining Momentum," BBC News, December 12, 2022.

[57] Julian O'Neill, "Disbandment Talks Could Legitimize Paramilitaries, Warns Long," BBC News, February 27, 2025.

[58] See, for example, Rory Carroll, "Northern Ireland Republican Dissidents Lurk in the Shadows Hoping to be Noticed," *Guardian*, February 23, 2023.

[59] ÓNH declared itself on cease-fire in 2018, although a small splinter group formed in opposition to the cease-fire. Also see Zoe Manzi, "Northern Ireland Related Terrorism," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, January 15, 2024.

[60] Julian O'Neill, "Omagh Police Shooting: John Caldwell Attack Causes Shockwaves in PSNI," BBC News, February 25, 2023; Allison Morris, "New IRA Still Main Suspect in DCI Caldwell Shooting, Chief Constable Tells Policing Board," *Belfast Telegraph*, March 2, 2023.

[61] The New IRA claimed responsibility for McKee's death but reportedly issued an apology; the group asserted that it had intended to shoot a police officer during the riots but had hit McKee by accident. See Ed O'Loughlin, "New IRA Apologizes for Killing of Journalist in Northern Ireland," *New York Times*, April 23, 2019.

[62] Seanin Graham, "PSNI Officers Warned of Republican Dissident Threat to Their Families," *Irish Times*, March 7, 2023.

Economic Development and Equal Opportunity

Northern Ireland's economy has made considerable advances since the 1990s but also has faced challenges. Between 1997 and 2007, Northern Ireland's economy grew an average of 5.6% annually (marginally above the UK average of 5.4%). Unemployment decreased from over 17% in the 1980s to 4.3% by 2007.[63] The 2008-2009 global recession led to a prolonged downturn in the region and economic recovery was slow and uneven for years but gradually improved between 2013 and 2019. Like elsewhere in the UK, the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting restrictions on social and business activity affected Northern Ireland's economy in 2020, but economic activity largely recovered in 2021.[64]

Since mid-2022, higher energy costs and a rise in inflation and interest rates have affected Northern Ireland's economy, contributing to some quarterly fluctuations in economic output and an increased cost of living. As inflation and interest rates began to ease in mid-2023, Northern Ireland's economic output increased by 3% between the third quarters of 2023 and 2024; in comparison to pre-pandemic levels in 2019, economic activity in Northern Ireland in the third quarter of 2024 showed stronger growth (9.7%, driven largely by the services sector) than in the UK (2.9%).[65] Northern Ireland's unemployment rate for October-December 2024 was 1.6%, lower than the UK average unemployment rate of 4.4%.[66]

Some long-standing economic difficulties and disparities persist in Northern Ireland. Income levels in Northern Ireland remain below the UK average. Of the UK's 12 economic regions, Northern Ireland had the third-lowest gross domestic product per capita in 2022 (£29,674, or about $38,236), below the UK's average (£37,076, or about $47,773).[67] Northern Ireland has a persistently higher rate of economic inactivity (26.6% in the fourth quarter of 2024) than the UK overall (21.5% in the same quarter), exacerbated by long-term illness and disability in the aftermath of the pandemic, and a high proportion of working-age individuals with no formal qualifications.[68] Studies indicate the historically poorest areas in Northern Ireland remain so, and many of these bore the brunt of the Troubles. Although many of the areas considered the most deprived are predominantly Catholic, others are predominantly Protestant. Some experts contend the most economically disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland have benefitted the least from the so-called *peace dividend*.[69]

At the same time, Northern Ireland has made strides in promoting equality in its workforce. The gap in workforce participation between Protestants and Catholics has shrunk considerably since 1990 and has converged in the last few years. According to the most recent data available from Northern Ireland's Equality Commission, in 2022, for the first time, the share of Catholics in

[63] Orla Ryan, "Northern Ireland's Economic Fears," BBC News, June 22, 2001; Northern Ireland Executive Economic Strategy, *Consultation on Priorities for Sustainable Growth and Prosperity*, January 2011.

[64] Valentina Romei and Chris Giles, "Northern Ireland Economy Has Outperformed Rest of UK, ONS Figures Show," *Financial Times*, November 29, 2021; John Campbell, "COVID-19: NI Economic Recovery May Be Weaker Than Originally Thought," BBC News, February 28, 2022.

[65] Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *Northern Ireland Composite Economic Index Quarter 3 2024*, January 16, 2025.

[66] Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *Northern Ireland Labour Market Report*, February 18, 2025.

[67] Matthew Ward and Daniel Harari, *Regional and National Economic Indicators*, UK House of Commons Library, February 19, 2025.

[68] Ulster University, *Economic Inactivity: Who, What, Where, Why?*, January 2024; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *Northern Ireland Labour Market Report*, February 18, 2025.

[69] Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures 2017*, November 2017; Duncan Morrow, *Sectarianism in Northern Ireland: A Review*, University of Ulster, 2019, pp. 32-35; Pivotal Public Policy Forum NI, *Reconciliation and Deprivation: Twin Challenges for Northern Ireland*, May 2023.

Northern Ireland's workforce (50.1%) was larger than the share of Protestants (49.9%); in comparison, in 1990, the share of Protestants in Northern Ireland's workforce was 65%, while the share of Catholics was 35%.[70]

Implications of Brexit[71]

In the UK's June 2016 public referendum on EU membership, voters in Northern Ireland favored remaining in the EU, 56% to 44% (the UK overall voted in favor of leaving, 52% to 48%). The UK began negotiations with the EU on the terms of its withdrawal in 2017 and concluded these negotiations in late 2019. The UK withdrew from the EU on January 31, 2020, ending its 47-year membership in the bloc. The UK continued to apply EU rules and to participate in the EU's single market and customs union until the end of an 11-month transition period that concluded on December 31, 2020.[72]

Brexit has exacerbated political and societal divisions in Northern Ireland and posed considerable challenges, with potential implications for Northern Ireland's devolved government, economy, and, in the longer term, constitutional status. Even before Brexit, demographic trends in Northern Ireland (in which Catholics now outnumber Protestants) and changes in societal attitudes (especially among young people, who may not be as wedded to traditional religious or ethnic identities) were causing some in the unionist community to perceive a loss in unionist traditions and dominance. The initial post-Brexit trade arrangements for Northern Ireland arguably enhanced a sense of unionist disenfranchisement, partly by raising concerns that Northern Ireland could be drawn closer to the Republic of Ireland's economic orbit and this could be a precursor to a united Ireland. Brexit also eroded trust between the UK and Irish governments. As the guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, cooperation between the UK and Ireland is deemed essential to the continued functioning and implementation of the peace accord.[73]

The Irish Border and Post-Brexit Arrangements

At the time of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the EU membership of both the UK and the Republic of Ireland was regarded as essential to underpinning the political settlement by providing a common European identity for unionists and nationalists in Northern Ireland. EU law also provided a supporting framework for guaranteeing the human rights, equality, and nondiscrimination provisions of the peace accord. Since 1998, as security checkpoints were dismantled in accordance with the peace agreement, and because both the UK and Ireland belonged to the EU's single market and customs union, the circuitous 300-mile land border between Northern Ireland and Ireland effectively disappeared. The open border served as an

[70] Data applies to Northern Ireland's "total monitored workforce," as defined in and required by Northern Ireland's fair employment legislation; "total monitored workforce" does not include the self-employed, school teachers, or those in private sector companies with ten or less employees. Northern Ireland Equality Commission, *Fair Employment Monitoring Report No. 33*, released July 10, 2024.

[71] For more background on Brexit, see CRS Report R46730, *Brexit: Overview, Trade, and Northern Ireland*, coordinated by Derek E. Mix.

[72] In December 2020, UK and EU negotiators also concluded a Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), which sets out terms for post-Brexit trade and economic relations, as well as cooperation on a range of other issues.

[73] Ceylan Yeginsu, "In Northern Ireland, Brexit Deal Is Seen as Betrayal," *New York Times*, October 24, 2019; Simon Carswell, "Loyalists on Brexit: A One-Way Route to an Economic United Ireland," *Irish Times*, January 30, 2020; Rory Carroll, "Northern Ireland Clashes Reflect Loyalists' Fear of Marginalisation," *Guardian*, April 5, 2021; Pat Leahy, "NI Protocol Tensions Threaten UK-Ireland, UK-EU and UK-US Relations," *Irish Times*, June 11, 2021.

important political and psychological symbol on both sides of the sectarian divide and helped produce a dynamic cross-border economy.

Preventing a *hard border* with customs checks and physical infrastructure on the island of Ireland was a key goal, and a major stumbling block, in negotiating the UK's withdrawal agreement with the EU. UK, Irish, and EU leaders asserted repeatedly that they did not desire a hard border post-Brexit. Security assessments suggested that if border or custom posts were reinstated, violent dissident groups opposed to the peace process would view such infrastructure as targets, endangering the lives of police and customs officers. Experts feared that such violence would threaten the region's security and stability and potentially put the peace process at risk.[74]

Many in Northern Ireland and Ireland also were eager to maintain an open border to ensure "frictionless" trade, safeguard the North-South economy, and protect community relations. People in border communities worried that any hardening of the border could affect daily travel across the border to work, shop, or visit family and friends. Studies conducted in 2017-2018 suggested there were upward of 300 public and private border crossing points along the border; during the Troubles, only a fraction of crossing points were open and hour-long delays due to security measures and bureaucratic hurdles were common.[75]

In early 2019, the UK Parliament rejected an initial UK-EU withdrawal agreement three times, in large part because of concerns that arrangements for the Irish border would have kept the UK tied too closely to the EU single market and customs union. Some Brexit advocates contended that Ireland and the EU were exaggerating the security concerns about the border. Those of this view also noted that, although the Good Friday Agreement commits the UK to normalizing security arrangements (including the removal of security installations "consistent with the level of threat"), it does not explicitly require an open border. The Irish government and many officials and stakeholders in Northern Ireland and the UK argued that an open border had become intrinsic to peace and to ensuring fulfillment of the Good Friday Agreement's provisions on north-south cooperation on cross-border issues (such as transportation, agriculture, and the environment).[76]

The Northern Ireland Protocol and Implementation Challenges

In October 2019, the EU and the government of then-UK Prime Minister Johnson reached a revised withdrawal agreement with a renegotiated Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland to ensure an open border on the island of Ireland.[77] Under the terms of the protocol, which also sought to safeguard the rules of the EU single market, Northern Ireland would remain legally in the UK customs territory but would maintain regulatory alignment with the EU. The protocol's provisions eliminated the need for checks on trade in goods at the land border between Northern Ireland and Ireland but essentially created a regulatory and customs border in the Irish Sea between Northern Ireland and Great Britain (often termed the *Irish Sea border*). Any physical checks necessary to ensure regulatory and customs compliance for goods moving from Great Britain to Northern

[74] Henry McDonald, "Police Chief Says 'Hard Brexit' Irish Border Would Be Paramilitary Target," *Guardian*, February 7, 2018.

[75] Sarah Lyall, "On Irish Border, Worries That Brexit Will Undo a Hard-Won Peace," *New York Times*, August 5, 2017; Maeve Sheehan, "Irish Army Identifies 300 Border Crossing Points," *Belfast Telegraph*, December 17, 2018.

[76] John Campbell, "Brexit: Does the Irish Peace Accord Rule Out a Hard Border?," BBC News, January 30, 2019; Tom McTague, "Brexit's Ulster Problem," *Politico*, June 12, 2019.

[77] Government of the UK, *New Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration*, October 19, 2019, at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-withdrawal-agreement-and-political-declaration; and Government of the UK, *New Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland and Political Declaration*, October 19, 2019, at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-protocol-on-irelandnorthern-ireland-and-political-declaration.

Ireland would be conducted at ports or points of entry away from the politically sensitive land border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

The DUP and other unionists strongly opposed these "Northern Ireland-only" arrangements, contending the provisions in the protocol would treat Northern Ireland differently from the rest of the UK and would jeopardize Northern Ireland's economy, its participation in the UK's internal market, and the region's position as part of the UK. The DUP and other unionists also objected to what they viewed as a lack of sufficient democratic consent in the development or amendment of EU rules that would apply in Northern Ireland. In an effort to address such concerns, negotiators included a provision in the revised protocol making its renewal after four years subject to the consent of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

In light of the large majority won by then-Prime Minister Johnson's Conservative Party in the December 2019 UK parliamentary elections, the UK Parliament approved the withdrawal agreement in January 2020. Both the UK and the EU subsequently ratified the withdrawal agreement. The UK withdrew from the EU on January 31, 2020.

The Northern Ireland protocol took effect on January 1, 2021 (after the 11-month transition period) and implementation and operational challenges soon emerged. The new customs and regulatory requirements on goods entering Northern Ireland from Great Britain posed trade and administrative difficulties for some businesses and consumers in Northern Ireland, despite initial grace periods for full implementation of the new rules for agri-food products, medicines, and other items.[78] Problems included shipping delays and product shortages, especially for Northern Ireland supermarkets dependent on suppliers elsewhere in the UK.[79]

The UK government and the DUP increasingly argued that the protocol was not sustainable, called for substantial changes to the protocol, and repeatedly threatened to suspend parts of it.[80] Sinn Fein, other nationalists, and the Irish government maintained that the protocol was the only viable option to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland. The EU rejected UK and DUP calls to fundamentally renegotiate the protocol and asserted that any measures to resolve implementation problems must be found "within the framework" of the protocol.[81]

The UK and EU engaged in discussions to address issues with the protocol, but talks were contentious and progress was slow. The role of the EU institutions in enforcing EU rules and settling disputes related to the protocol—especially the role of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU, often commonly referred to as the European Court of Justice, or ECJ)—was particularly controversial. UK officials and the DUP contended that such EU oversight infringed on UK sovereignty. EU officials also consistently raised concerns that the UK was not implementing certain aspects of the protocol (including building and properly staffing custom posts in Northern Ireland, sharing customs data, and properly declaring goods entering Northern Ireland).[82]

[78] Since the protocol took effect, physical checks necessary to ensure regulatory and customs compliance have been conducted at ports or points of entry on the northeast coast of Northern Ireland upon arrival from Great Britain.

[79] See, for example, Shawn Pogatchnik, "Supermarket Pleas Mount as Brexit Leaves Northern Ireland Shelves Bare," *Politico*, January 13, 2021; "British Supermarkets May Shift Supply Chains to EU if Northern Ireland Trade Not Addressed," Reuters, July 17, 2021.

[80] See, for example, Government of the UK, *Northern Ireland Protocol: The Way Forward*, July 21, 2021, and Democratic Unionist Party, *Speech by DUP Leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP*, September 9, 2021.

[81] European Commission, "Statement by Vice-President Maros Sefcovic Following Today's Announcement by the UK Government Regarding the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland," press release, July 21, 2021.

[82] "UK Says That Brussels Trying to 'Exploit' Biden Visit to Exert Brexit Pressure," *Financial Times*, June 8, 2021; Institute for Government, "Northern Ireland Protocol: Ongoing UK-EU Disagreements," January 26, 2022.

UK-EU negotiations on the protocol's implementation were largely stalled for most of 2022, but they gained momentum after then-UK Prime Minister Sunak assumed office in October 2022. In one sign of potential progress, the UK and the EU reached a trade data-sharing agreement in January 2023. This data-sharing agreement provided the EU access to UK technology systems and detailed, real-time information on goods entering Northern Ireland from Great Britain and those possibly at risk of entering Ireland and the EU market.[83]

The 2023 Windsor Framework[84]

On February 27, 2023, the UK and the EU announced a new agreement in principle—the Windsor Framework—to address implementation challenges and other concerns with the Northern Ireland protocol. The Windsor Framework includes a command paper from the UK government presenting the solutions agreed to by the UK and the EU and a joint UK-EU political declaration. Both the UK and the EU stressed that the Windsor Framework sought to provide solutions to protocol-related issues affecting everyday life for people and businesses in Northern Ireland. UK and EU officials officially approved the Windsor Framework in March 2023. Key areas addressed in the Windsor Framework include the following:

- **Trade and Customs.** The Windsor Framework established a system of "green and red lanes" for goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. Checks and customs paperwork would be significantly reduced for "green lane" goods remaining in Northern Ireland but stay in place for "red lane" goods destined for (or at risk of entering) Ireland and the EU market. The UK and the EU also agreed to simpler rules for certain agri-food products entering Northern Ireland and that UK health and safety standards (rather than EU standards) would apply to all retail food and drink intended for end consumption in Northern Ireland (thereby ensuring that Northern Ireland consumers could still buy certain iconic British products, such as fresh sausages). These new trade rules came into force in October 2023. An expanded and strengthened UK trusted trader scheme and new data-sharing and labeling arrangements help to oversee the trade and customs provisions and safeguard the EU single market.
- **EU Rules and Governance.** According to UK officials, the Windsor Framework removed 1,700 pages of EU law from applying in Northern Ireland (including more than 60 EU food and drink rules covering over 1,000 pages) and thus also eliminated the EU Court of Justice's "interpretation and oversight in those areas." In doing so, the Windsor Framework narrowed the range of EU laws applicable in Northern Ireland to less than 3% overall, which "are there solely, and only as strictly necessary" to maintain Northern Ireland's access to the EU single market.[85] The EU, however, stressed that the CJEU remains the "sole and ultimate arbiter of EU law" and would have the "final say on EU law and single

[83] Annabelle Dickson et al., "EU and UK Agree 'Way Forward' on Post-Brexit Goods Data in Fresh Sign of Progress," *Politico*, January 9, 2023.

[84] Information in this section is based on the package of documents that comprise the Windsor Framework, released February 27, 2023, and available from the Government of the UK, at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-windsor-framework. This section also draws from various news sources and the European Commission, "Questions and Answers: Political Agreement in Principle on the Windsor Framework, a New Way Forward for the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland," February 27, 2023.

[85] See Government of the UK, *Command Paper on the Windsor Framework*, February 27, 2023, pp. 3, 13, and 21, at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1138989/The_Windsor_Framework_a_new_way_forward.pdf.

market issues."[86] In other words, in the EU's view, the Windsor Framework does not change the role of the CJEU in interpreting EU law in disputes over EU rules that continue to apply in Northern Ireland.

- **The Stormont Brake and Other Consent Mechanisms.** A new mechanism known as the *Stormont brake* would allow Members of Northern Ireland's Legislative Assembly to formally object to the automatic application of changes in EU goods rules that may have a "significant impact" on "everyday life" in Northern Ireland. Any request to trigger the brake would need the support of at least 30 MLAs from at least two political parties. The actual decision to trigger the brake would rest with the UK government. As part of the Windsor Framework package, the UK government also asserted that, with some exceptions, it would not agree to adding any new EU law to those that apply in Northern Ireland unless the Assembly indicated cross-community support.[87]
- **Taxes and State Aid.** The Windsor Framework allowed certain UK VAT rules to apply in Northern Ireland (rather than EU rules) and for the UK to diverge from EU rules on the structure of excise duties. The framework also clarified the circumstances in which EU state aid rules apply in Northern Ireland.
- **Other Issues.** The Windsor Framework eased rules in several other areas, including the movement of pets between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and on all types of parcels from people or businesses in Great Britain to friends, family, and consumers in Northern Ireland. Medicines approved for use by the UK's medicines regulator also would be available in Northern Ireland at the same time and under the same conditions as in the rest of the UK.

Both the UK and the EU sought to portray the Windsor Framework as opening a new era of UK-EU relations based on cooperation and dialogue.

The 2024 UK-DUP Deal

Then-DUP leader Donaldson and other DUP officials recognized that the Windsor Framework represented a significant effort to address unionist concerns about the Northern Ireland protocol. However, the DUP ultimately found the solutions posed by the Windsor Framework to be insufficient and continued to block reestablishing Northern Ireland's power-sharing institutions. DUP critics contended that among other issues with the Windsor Framework, some EU laws would still apply in Northern Ireland and that the Irish Sea border remained. Some in the DUP also wanted more clarity on the operation of the Stormont brake.[88] The UK government continued negotiations with the DUP throughout 2023 to address remaining concerns about the post-Brexit arrangements and restore Northern Ireland's devolved government.

On January 30, 2024, the DUP's leadership endorsed a package of measures proposed by the UK government and agreed to end the party's boycott of Northern Ireland's power-sharing institutions. The next day, the UK government published details of the deal in a command paper,

[86] See, for example, European Commission, "A New Way Forward for the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland: Political Agreement in Principle on the Windsor Framework," press release, February 27, 2023; and Comments by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen during press conference with UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, February 27, 2023, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WtxuqaFwsk0.

[87] Government of the UK, *Command Paper on the Windsor Framework*, February 27, 2023, pp. 22-25.

[88] Shawn Pogatchnik, "DUP Won't Be Pushed into Accepting UK-EU Deal on Northern Ireland—But Sees an Attractive Veto," *Politico*, February 27, 2023; Enda McClafferty, "Brexit Deal: Both Yes and No Carry Risks for DUP," BBC News, February 28, 2023.

Safeguarding the Union, along with draft legislation to implement parts of the proposed measures (two pieces of legislation were subsequently debated and approved by the UK parliament).[89] UK officials reportedly sought to portray the changes outlined in *Safeguarding the Union* as "significant" but also stressed that they would not alter the "fundamentals" of the Windsor Framework as agreed with the EU.[90] Some analysts assessed that the changes to the post-Brexit trading rules for Northern Ireland in the UK-DUP deal were relatively minimal and they characterized *Safeguarding the Union* as designed largely to reassure unionists of Northern Ireland's place in the UK.[91] Key measures in *Safeguarding the Union* included the following:

- **Facilitating Trade and Protecting the UK's Internal Market.** Checks and paperwork on goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland would be reduced. The Windsor Framework's "green lane" (for goods remaining in Northern Ireland) would be replaced with an "internal UK market system" for goods remaining within the UK, and there would be no routine checks except for those conducted as part of a risk-based approach to tackle criminality, smuggling, or disease. To use the new internal UK market system, businesses would still be required to join a UK trusted trader scheme. The Windsor Framework's "red lane" would remain (for goods destined for or at risk of entering Ireland and the EU market), although the UK government assessed that more than 80% of goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland would take place under the UK internal market system. Then-DUP leader Donaldson asserted that these and other provisions effectively "[remove] the border in the UK's internal market."[92] The command paper also included measures to reinforce "unfettered access" for Northern Ireland goods and businesses to the UK internal market.
- **Reaffirming Northern Ireland's Place Within the UK.** Legislation introduced with the command paper (and subsequently approved by the UK Parliament) sought to make explicit that the Windsor Framework does not prejudice Northern Ireland's constitutional status within the UK or the region's status as part of the UK economy (including the UK's customs territory and internal market). In addition, the UK government committed to screening future UK legislation for "significant adverse implications for Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market." The command paper also set out several measures or proposals to strengthen ties between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, including through establishing a new East-West Council (to deepen connections between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK in areas such as trade, transport, education, and culture) and a new Intertrade UK body (to focus on promoting trade in both directions between Northern Ireland and Great Britain).

[89] Government of the UK, *Safeguarding the Union*, released January 31, 2024, at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65ba3b7bee7d490013984a59/Command_Paper__1_.pdf. Also see, David Torrance, *Northern Ireland Devolution: Safeguarding the Union*, UK House of Commons Library, April 3, 2024.

[90] As quoted in, "DUP Says Stormont Deal Has Delivered 'Fundamental Change' to UK-EU Trading Rules," BreakingNews.ie, January 31, 2024.

[91] John Campbell, "DUP Deal: Government Command Paper Bids to Reassure Unionists," BBC News, February1, 2024; Peter Foster, "Four Years on and Brexit Still Isn't Done," *Financial Times*, February 1, 2024; Joël Reland, "The Northern Ireland Deal Offers Meaningful Change—If Westminster Keeps Its Word," *UK in a Changing Europe*, February 2, 2024.

[92] As quoted in, John Campbell, "DUP Deal Aimed at Restoring Power Sharing in Northern Ireland Is Published," BBC News, January 31, 2024.

- **Clarifying Operational Arrangements for the Stormont Brake.** The UK government pledged to ensure that Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly have the information needed to make "full use" of the brake by publishing operational guidance. The UK government also committed to give Assembly members early warning and notice of changes to EU legislation that could affect Northern Ireland and be subject to the brake.[93]

Some in the DUP continued to find the measures in *Safeguarding the Union* to be insufficient and opposed the party's decision to agree to reestablish Northern Ireland's devolved government. Those of this view argued that the changes in the UK command paper were largely cosmetic and that the Irish Sea border would still exist.[94] Some nationalists raised concerns that some elements in the UK command paper could undermine north-south cooperation (between Northern Ireland and Ireland) and the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement.[95]

In December 2024, in accordance with the terms agreed in the Northern Ireland protocol/Windsor Framework, the Northern Ireland Assembly held a vote on whether to maintain the region's post-Brexit arrangements. MLAs approved continuing the arrangements by a majority vote of 48 to 36. Sinn Fein, Alliance, and SDLP MLAs voted in favor; DUP, UUP, and other unionist MLAs voted against. Given the lack of cross-community support, the post-Brexit arrangements were approved to continue for another four years (if maintaining the arrangements had received cross-community support, they would have been extended for eight years).[96]

Economic Concerns

Following the 2016 UK referendum, many experts expressed concern about Brexit's possible economic consequences for Northern Ireland. Studies indicate that Northern Ireland depends more on the EU market (and especially that of Ireland) for its exports than does the rest of the UK.[97] In 2023, approximately 70% of Northern Ireland's exports went to the EU, including about 54% to Ireland, which remains Northern Ireland's top single export and import partner.[98]

Many officials and analysts in Northern Ireland and Ireland viewed maintaining an open border after Brexit as crucial to protecting the island's cross-border economy, as well as labor markets and industries that operate on an all-island basis. Many manufacturers in Northern Ireland and Ireland depend on integrated supply chains north and south of the border. For example, raw

[93] For more information on the January 2024 UK-DUP deal and the measures outlined in the *Safeguarding the Union* command paper, also see Peter Foster and Jude Webber, "What Is in the New Northern Ireland Deal and How Will It Work?," *Financial Times*, January 31, 2024; John Campbell, "DUP Deal: What Exactly Is in the Safeguarding the Union Paper?," BBC News, January 31, 2024; John Curtis, *Northern Ireland Protocol/Windsor Framework: New Devolution Deal*, UK House of Commons Library, February 1, 2024; Jill Rutter and Matthew Fright, "Government Deal with the DUP to Restore Power Sharing in Northern Ireland," Institute for Government, February 1, 2024.

[94] See, for example, David Lynch and Nick Lester, "DUP Split over Stormont Deal as Nigel Dodds Says Sea Border Concerns Remain," BreakingNews.ie., February 1, 2024; Adrian Rutherford, "Three Top DUP Figures Say There Is 'No Dispute' That Irish Sea Border Remains," *Belfast Telegraph*, February 10, 2024.

[95] See, for example, Freya McClements, "UK Government 'Undermining' Belfast Agreement with Pro-unionist Stance, SDLP Leader Says," *Irish Times*, February 12, 2024.

[96] See Northern Ireland Assembly, *Democratic Consent Resolution*, at https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/plenary/details.aspx?&ses=0&doc=419985&pn=0&sid=vd. Also see, "Stormont Votes to Extend Post-Brexit Trading Arrangements," BBC News, December 10, 2024.

[97] Report of the UK House of Lords European Union Committee, *Brexit: UK-Irish Relations*, December 2016; Lisa O'Carroll, "Pro-Brexit UK Regions More Dependent on EU for Exports, Study Finds," *Guardian*, July 17, 2022.

[98] Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *Northern Ireland Economic Trade Statistics 2023*, December 11, 2024, at https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/economy-and-labour-market/northern-ireland-economic-trade-statistics-2023.html.

materials that go into making milk, cheese, butter, and alcoholic drinks often cross the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland several times for processing and packaging.[99] The vast majority of cross-border transactions are made by micro and small businesses, which dominate Northern Ireland's economy.[100]

UK and DUP leaders assert that the rest of the UK is overall more important economically to Northern Ireland than the EU given the value of exports. In 2023, sales to other parts of the UK (£17.1 billion) were almost double the value of exports to Ireland (£8.7 billion) and nearly six times the value of exports to the rest of the EU (£2.6 billion).[101] The DUP objected in part to the post-Brexit arrangements because of concerns that they could negatively impact Northern Ireland's economic ties to the UK; DUP officials also argued that the new rules and administrative burdens would increase costs for Northern Ireland businesses and consumers.[102]

Supporters of the post-Brexit arrangements for Northern Ireland maintain that they offer the region unique economic opportunities. Following the agreement on the Windsor Framework in 2023, then-Prime Minister Sunak touted the potential economic benefits of Northern Ireland's privileged access to both the UK internal market and the EU single market.[103] As part of the UK customs union, Northern Ireland also is able to participate in future UK trade deals. Some officials and experts suggested the post-Brexit arrangements may help make Northern Ireland a more attractive destination for foreign direct investment.[104]

In a November 2024 poll by Queen's University Belfast, 48% of respondents viewed the Northern Ireland protocol/Windsor Framework as having a positive impact on Northern Ireland's economy and 63% regarded the post-Brexit arrangements as potentially beneficial.[105] In early March 2025, Northern Ireland Secretary of State Benn reportedly stated that most goods were "flowing relatively smoothly" between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.[106] Some DUP officials and Northern Ireland retailers continue to report implementation problems with the post-Brexit trading rules, including for small businesses. Critics of Northern Ireland's post-Brexit arrangements also note reports that the region's dual access to both the UK and EU markets has not yet yielded new foreign direct investment in Northern Ireland.[107]

[99] See, for example, Simon Marks, "Brexit Is (Maybe) the Ruin of Irish Whiskey," *Politico*, March 3, 2017; Colm Kelpie, "Brexit: How Would No-Deal Affect Northern Ireland?," BBC News, September 22, 2019.

[100] Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *Overview of Northern Ireland Trade*, April 4, 2023.

[101] Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *Northern Ireland Economic Trade Statistics 2023*, December 11, 2024.

[102] John Campbell, "Brexit Deal Could Reduce Spending, Investment, and Trade in NI," BBC News, October 22, 2019; Democratic Unionist Party, *Remove the Protocol*, at https://mydup.com/policies/remove-ni-protocol.

[103] Andrew McDonald, "Rishi Sunak Gives EU Windsor Framework Deal the Hard Sell in Belfast," *Politico*, February 28, 2023.

[104] See, for example, Northern Ireland Department for the Economy, "Minister Pitches the North's Unique Business Proposition to US Business Leaders," press release, March 14, 2024.

[105] David Phinnemore and Katy Hayward, *Testing the Temperature 12: What Do Voters in Northern Ireland Think About the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland/Windsor Framework?*, Queen's University Belfast, November 2024.

[106] As quoted in "Goods 'Flowing Relatively Smoothly' Between NI and GB – Benn," BBC News, March 4, 2025.

[107] Clodagh Rice, "No Evidence of Dual Market Access Attracting NI Investment," BBC News, October 16, 2024; John Campbell, "Small Businesses Being 'Crucified' by Sea Border," BBC News, December 4, 2024; John Campbell, "Supermarkets Still Facing Sea Border Problems," BBC News, February 22, 2025.

Constitutional Status and Border Poll Prospects

Brexit has revived questions about Northern Ireland's constitutional status. Sinn Fein has argued that "Brexit changes everything" and could generate greater support for a united Ireland.[108] Since the 2016 Brexit referendum, Sinn Fein has repeatedly called for a *border poll* (a referendum on whether Northern Ireland should remain part of the UK or join the Republic of Ireland) in the hopes of realizing its long-term goal of Irish unification. As noted previously, the Good Friday Agreement provides for the possibility of a border poll, in line with the consent principle. Any decision to hold a border poll in Northern Ireland on its constitutional status rests with the UK Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who must call one if it "appears likely" that "a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland."[109]

At present, opinion polls indicate that more people in Northern Ireland continue to support the region's position as part of the UK. A February 2024 poll found 54% in favor of Northern Ireland's continued position within the UK compared with 39% for a united Ireland.[110] A poll conducted by the *Irish Times* in the second half of 2024 found that 48% of those polled supported Northern Ireland remaining part of the UK versus 34% in favor of a united Ireland (with 14% undecided). In comparison to previous *Irish Times* polling in 2022 and 2023, the 2024 results indicated a slight decrease in support for Northern Ireland's continued position within the UK and a small uptick in support for a united Ireland.[111]

Several factors could influence whether momentum builds for a border poll in the medium to longer term. As seen by Northern Ireland's 2021 census results, demographics are shifting in Northern Ireland, with those of a Catholic background now outnumbering those of a Protestant background. The post-Brexit arrangements for Northern Ireland could lead to enhanced trade ties with Ireland and greater economic integration (reports indicate increased cross-border trade since 2021).[112] Despite a decrease in vote share for Sinn Fein in elections in Ireland in 2024, Sinn Fein's electoral successes in Northern Ireland and key party leader Michelle O'Neill's role as First Minister could keep political attention focused on the question of a possible border poll.[113]

Societal attitudes in Northern Ireland are changing as well, especially among young people, who may not be as wedded to traditional religious or ethnic identities. Analysts suggest that non-aligned voters who do not identify as unionist or nationalist may be the decisive swing bloc in any future border poll and that such voters are likely to be swayed on the question of Irish unification more by its implications for issues such as the economy, health care, and pensions

[108] Sinn Fein Discussion Document, *Towards a United Ireland*, November 2016.

[109] UK Government, Northern Ireland Act 1998.

[110] Suzanne Breen, "More People in NI Would Vote to Stay Part of UK If Border Poll Was Called," *Belfast Telegraph*, February 18, 2024.

[111] Support for Northern Ireland remaining part of the UK was 50% in 2022 and 51% in 2023; support for Irish unification was 27% in 2022 and 31% in 2023. Pat Leahy, "Support for Irish Unification Growing in Northern Ireland, Poll Finds," *Irish Times*, February 7, 2025.

[112] Shawn Pogatchnik, "All-Ireland Trade Booming in Post-Brexit Economy," *Politico*, February 15, 2022; Morwenna Coniam, "Irish Trade with Britain, Northern Ireland Climbs Despite Brexit," Bloomberg.com, August 15, 2022; Ireland Central Statistics Office, "Record Levels of Exports and Imports in 2022," February 15, 2023; Ryan McAleer, "Trade in 2023: The Year When the Protocol Became the Windsor Framework," *Irish News*, December 27, 2023; John Campbell, "Value of NI Sales and Exports Up, New Figures Suggest," BBC News, December 11, 2024.

[113] See, for example, Megan Specia, "Northern Ireland Has a Sinn Fein Leader. It's a Landmark Moment," *New York Times*, February 3, 2024; Padraic Halpin and Amanda Ferguson, "Sinn Fein Struggles Deal Blow to Nationalists' United Ireland Dream," Reuters, November 21, 2024.

than by identity politics.[114] The aforementioned *Irish Times* poll conducted in 2024 found that roughly 18% of respondents in Northern Ireland from a Catholic background were opposed to Irish unification and 16% were undecided.[115]

Irish unification also would be subject to Ireland's consent and approval. Opinion polls in Ireland consistently show a relatively high level of support for unification (typically over 60%).[116] In 2021, the Irish government launched a "Shared Island" initiative to promote cross-border cooperation, dialogue, and research on common challenges. Irish officials have asserted that voters, both north and south, must have a clear idea of what a united Ireland would look like—and how unionists would be accommodated politically—before any border poll is held.[117]

Some concerns exist in Ireland about unification, including the possibility that it could spark renewed loyalist violence in Northern Ireland and its potential economic costs. The UK provides Northern Ireland annually with a roughly £10 billion (about $13 billion) budget subsidy to make up the shortfall in the region's tax revenues. Although part of this subsidy helps to fund Northern Ireland's share of the UK's national debt and defense spending—costs that would not be incurred to the same extent by Dublin—Northern Ireland's budget deficit points to concerns about the region's economy and reliance on the public sector. In a 2021 poll, 67% of people surveyed in Ireland would support unification, but 54% reported they would be unwilling to pay higher taxes to fund a united Ireland.[118] In a December 2023 poll conducted in Ireland, 52% of respondents believed that Irish unity would be costly in the short term, even if beneficial in the long term.[119]

U.S. Policy and Congressional Interests

Support for the Peace Process

Successive U.S. Administrations have viewed the Good Friday Agreement as the best framework for a lasting peace in Northern Ireland. The Clinton Administration was instrumental in helping the parties forge the agreement, and the George W. Bush Administration strongly backed its full implementation. U.S. officials welcomed the end to the IRA's armed campaign in 2005 and the restoration of the devolved government in 2007.

The Obama Administration remained engaged in the peace process. In 2009, then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Northern Ireland, addressed the Assembly, and urged Northern Ireland's leaders to reach an agreement on devolving policing and justice powers. In February 2010, President Obama welcomed the resulting Hillsborough Agreement. The Obama

[114] See, for example, Peter Foster and Laura Noonan, "Brexit Ignites the Debate About a United Ireland," *Financial Times*, April 6, 2021; Rory Carroll, "It's Closer Now Than It's Ever Been: Could There Soon Be a United Ireland?," *Guardian*, October 6, 2022; Megan Stack, "Is Ireland Headed for a Merger?," *New York Times*, November 21, 2023.

[115] Pat Leahy, "Support for Irish Unification Growing in Northern Ireland, Poll Finds," *Irish Times*, February 7, 2025.

[116] In the 2024 *Irish Times* poll, for example, 64% of respondents in Ireland supported unification while 17% were opposed. Pat Leahy, "Support for Irish Unification Growing in Northern Ireland, Poll Finds," *Irish Times*, February 7, 2025.

[117] See, for example, "Leo Varadkar Says Border Poll Not Appropriate at This Time," BBC News, July 3, 2022; Jude Webber, "Ireland's Reunification Talk Grows Louder," *Financial Times*, October 9, 2022.

[118] Fionnan Sheahan, "Majority Favour a United Ireland, but Just 22pc Would Pay for It," *Irish Independent*, May 1, 2021; Eoin Burke-Kennedy, "What Would Be the Economic Costs and Benefits of a United Ireland?," *Irish Times*, May 7, 2021.

[119] John Garry et al., "Northern Protestants Pessimistic on Benefits of Irish Unity," *Irish Times*, December 5, 2023.

Administration also welcomed the conclusion of both the 2014 Stormont House Agreement and the 2015 Fresh Start Agreement.

Like its predecessors, the first Trump Administration offered support and encouragement to Northern Ireland. In 2017, a U.S. State Department spokesperson asserted that the United States remained "ready to support efforts that ensure full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent follow-on cross-party agreements."[120] In March 2020, President Trump appointed his former acting Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney as U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland.

President Biden, a long-standing supporter of the Northern Ireland peace process, repeatedly asserted a strong and enduring U.S. commitment to the Good Friday Agreement.[121] Following the May 2022 Assembly election, the U.S. State Department called on Northern Ireland political leaders to work together to reestablish a functioning power-sharing government and stated that the United States "remains deeply committed to preserving the peace dividend of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and will always strive to protect these gains for all communities."[122] President Biden visited Northern Ireland in April 2023 to mark the peace accord's 25th anniversary.[123] In February 2024, the Biden Administration welcomed the restoration of Northern Ireland's devolved government.[124]

Many Members of Congress have supported the Northern Ireland peace process for decades. In the 118th Congress, for example, the Senate agreed to S.Res. 157 (by unanimous consent in May 2023) reiterating support for the Good Friday Agreement and commemorating its 25th anniversary. Over the years, congressional hearings and resolutions have addressed various aspects of implementing the Good Friday Agreement. A 2022 hearing in the 117th Congress centered on the role of young people in maintaining peace in Northern Ireland.[125]

Some Members of Congress also have a long-standing interest in policing issues and human rights in Northern Ireland. In March 2022, the House passed H.Res. 888 (117th Congress) commemorating the 50th anniversary of the 1972 Bloody Sunday killings and calling for justice for the victims and their families. Two hearings in 2022 discussed accountability and justice for victims of the Troubles, sparked in part by congressional concerns about the UK government's plans to establish a conditional immunity scheme and end most Troubles-era investigations and prosecutions.[126] In 2023, some Members of Congress sent letters to the UK government expressing concerns about the UK legacy legislation.[127] In July 2024, 25 Members sent a letter to

[120] U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, "Statement on Northern Ireland Power-Sharing Talks," November 1, 2017.

[121] See, for example, the White House, "Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Martin of Ireland Before Virtual Bilateral Meeting," March 17, 2022; and the White House, "Readout of President Joe Biden's Meeting with Taoiseach Leo Varadkar of Ireland," March 17, 2023.

[122] U.S. Department of State, "Northern Ireland Assembly Elections Results," press release, May 7, 2022.

[123] The White House, "Remarks by President Biden Marking the 25th Anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement," April 12, 2023.

[124] The White House, "Statement from President Joe Biden on the Restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly," press release, February 3, 2024.

[125] House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber, *The Role of Young People in Fostering Peace in Northern Ireland*, 117th Cong., 2nd sess., April 28, 2022.

[126] Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, *Northern Ireland: Accountability at Risk*, 117th Cong., 2nd sess., February 15, 2022; and House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber, *Truth and Accountability for Victims of the Troubles in Northern Ireland*, 117th Cong., 2nd sess., July 15, 2022.

[127] Office of Rep Brendan Boyle, "Boyle, Keating, Fitzpatrick Lead Congressional Letter to British Prime Minister Over Northern Ireland Legacy Legislation," press release, January 20, 2023; Ray O'Hanlon, "Congress Members Protest British Legacy Bill," *Irish Echo*, August 13, 2023.

new UK Prime Minister Starmer urging his government to swiftly repeal and replace the Legacy Act.[128] Some Members continue to follow the status of Troubles-related investigations and incidents of suspected collusion between state security agencies and paramilitary groups, including the 1989 slaying of Belfast attorney Patrick Finucane. In November 2024, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission held a hearing on the status of the Finucane case and UK government plans to hold a public inquiry.[129]

In the 117th Congress, some Members urged President Biden to appoint a new special envoy to Northern Ireland to protect the gains of the peace process in light of heightened Brexit-related tensions and the stalemate in reestablishing Northern Ireland's devolved government.[130] In December 2022, the U.S. State Department announced the appointment of former Representative Joe Kennedy III as U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland for Economic Affairs. The United States has long been a key trading partner and an important source of investment for Northern Ireland.[131] The Biden Administration tasked the Special Envoy to focus on supporting economic development and growth in Northern Ireland—including through attracting more U.S. investment to Northern Ireland—and strengthening people-to-people ties.[132]

Views on Brexit's Implications for Northern Ireland

President Biden and other Administration officials repeatedly stressed the view that Brexit must not undermine the Northern Ireland peace process or jeopardize the open border on the island of Ireland. President Biden and other Administration officials urged the UK to reach a negotiated solution with the EU to resolve the challenges in implementing the post-Brexit arrangements for Northern Ireland.[133] President Biden welcomed the February 2023 announcement that the UK and the EU had concluded the Windsor Framework, asserting that the new framework was "an essential step to ensuring that the hard-earned peace and progress of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement is preserved and strengthened."[134]

Some Members of Congress also have demonstrated an interest in Brexit's implications for Northern Ireland. A 2019 hearing in the 116th Congress focused on maintaining peace and stability in Northern Ireland in light of Brexit; many Members expressed support for ensuring an

[128] Office of Rep. Brendan Boyle, "Boyle Leads Bipartisan Letter to New British Prime Minister Calling for Immediate Repeal of Troubles Act," press release, July 15, 2024.

[129] Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, *Northern Ireland: The Patrick Finucane Case*, 117th Cong., 2nd sess., November 19, 2024.

[130] Suzanne Lynch, "US Politicians Urge Biden to Appoint Northern Ireland Envoy," *Irish Times*, May 13, 2021; Kerry O'Shea, "Congressional Group Reiterates U.S. Commitment to Northern Ireland," IrishCentral.com, August 5, 2022.

[131] According to UK statistics, the United States accounted for 14.1% of Northern Ireland's exports and 8.7% of its imports in 2023. Officials in Northern Ireland regard the United States as the region's "largest source of high-value, technology rich" foreign direct investment. In April 2023, the U.S. Special Envoy asserted that Northern Ireland had attracted nearly $2 billion in U.S. investment over the past decade and over 230 U.S. businesses were operating in and employing more than 30,000 people in Northern Ireland. See Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *UK Regions Imports and Exports of Goods by Country and World Region*, at https://uktradeingoodsmap.nisra.gov.uk; Northern Ireland Department for the Economy, "US and NI Investment Stronger Than Ever," June 23, 2022; and U.S. Department of State, "Special Online Briefing with Joseph Kennedy III," April 27, 2023.

[132] U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, "Announcement of Joe Kennedy III as U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland for Economic Affairs," press statement, December 19, 2022.

[133] See, for example, the White House, "Readout of President Joe Biden's Call with Prime Minister Rishi Sunak of the United Kingdom," press release, October 25, 2022.

[134] The White House, *Statement by President Joe Biden on the Windsor Framework*, February 27, 2023.

open border on the island of Ireland post-Brexit.[135] Some Members also welcomed the Windsor Framework as a way to resolve difficulties with the Northern Ireland protocol, protect the gains of the peace process, and facilitate the return of Northern Ireland's devolved government.[136] S.Res. 157 (agreed in the 118th Congress, noted previously) also expressed support for the Windsor Framework.

Amid heightened tensions in Northern Ireland in recent years, some in Congress tied their support for a possible future U.S.-UK free trade agreement to protecting the peace process (negotiations on a post-Brexit U.S.-UK free trade agreement began during the Trump Administration, but did not proceed during the Biden Administration). Both H.Res. 585 (116th Congress, passed in December 2019) and S.Res. 117 (117th Congress, passed in May 2021) reaffirmed support for the Good Friday Agreement in light of Brexit and asserted that any future U.S.-UK trade or other bilateral agreements must consider Brexit's impact on Northern Ireland. S.Res. 134 (117th Congress, passed in May 2022) expressed support for concluding U.S. trade agreements with both the UK and the EU; it noted that doing so should be "contingent" upon a UK-EU agreement that "fully protects and preserves the Good Friday Agreement."[137]

International Fund for Ireland

The United States has provided development aid to Northern Ireland primarily through the International Fund for Ireland (IFI), which was created in 1986. The UK and Irish governments established the IFI based on objectives in the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, but the IFI is an independent entity. It supports economic regeneration and social development projects in areas most affected by the conflict in Northern Ireland and in the border areas of the Republic of Ireland; in doing so, the IFI has sought to foster dialogue and reconciliation. According to the U.S. State Department, as of 2022, the United States had contributed more than $549 million to the IFI since its establishment.[138] The EU, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have provided funding for the IFI as well. In the 1980s and 1990s, U.S. appropriations for the IFI averaged around $23 million annually; in the 2000s, U.S. appropriations averaged $18 million each year.[139]

According to the IFI, the vast majority of projects it has supported with seed funding have been located in disadvantaged areas that have suffered from high unemployment, a lack of facilities, and little private sector investment. In its first two decades, IFI projects in Northern Ireland and the southern border counties focused on economic and business development and sectors such as tourism, agriculture, and technology. In 2006, the IFI announced it would begin shifting its focus toward projects aimed at promoting community reconciliation and overcoming past divisions.

[135] House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment, *Protecting the Good Friday Agreement from Brexit*, 116th Cong., 1st sess., October 22, 2019.

[136] See, for example, Office of Rep. Nancy Pelosi, "Pelosi Statement on Windsor Framework," press release, February 27, 2023; Ray O'Hanlon, "Biden, Reps. Welcome Framework Deal," *Irish Echo*, March 1, 2023.

[137] Also see CRS In Focus IF11123, *U.S.-UK Trade Relations*, by Shayerah I. Akhtar.

[138] U.S. Department of State, *U.S. Relations with Ireland*, fact sheet, June 2, 2022.

[139] The Anglo-Irish Agreement Support Act of 1986 (P.L. 99-415) authorizes U.S. contributions to the International Fund for Ireland.

Successive U.S. Administrations and some Members of Congress have backed the IFI as a means to promote economic development and encourage divided communities to work together. Support for paramilitary and dissident groups in Northern Ireland traditionally has been strongest in communities with high levels of unemployment and economic deprivation. Many observers have long viewed the creation of jobs and economic opportunity as a key part of resolving the conflict in Northern Ireland and have supported the IFI as part of the peace process. Some U.S. officials and Members of Congress also encouraged the IFI to place greater focus on reconciliation activities and welcomed its 2006 decision to do so. At times, critics have questioned the IFI's effectiveness, viewing certain IFI projects as largely wasteful or as potentially reinforcing sectarianism by requiring project recipients and attendees to identify their religion or community background in an attempt to ensure cross-community participation.[140]

In FY2011, amid the U.S. economic and budget crisis, some Members of Congress began to call for an end to U.S. funding for the IFI as part of a raft of budget-cutting measures. Some Members asserted that U.S. contributions to the IFI were no longer necessary given Ireland and Northern Ireland's improved political and economic situation (relative to what it was in the 1980s). In the final FY2011 continuing budget resolution (P.L. 112-10), Congress did not specify an allocation for the IFI (and has not done so in subsequent fiscal years).

Starting in FY2011, successive Administrations allocated funds from Economic Support Fund (ESF) resources to the IFI in the form of a grant for specific IFI activities to support peace and reconciliation programs. The United States provided $2.5 million per year in ESF to the IFI between FY2011 and FY2014; $750,000 per year from FY2015 to FY2019; $2 million for FY2020; $2.5 million for FY2021; $3 million for FY2022; and $4 million for FY2023. With the Trump Administration's decision to pause and review foreign assistance in January 2025 and reported subsequent cancellation of assistance awards, it is unclear what funds, if any, might be allocated for the IFI in the future.

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[140] See, for example, Sean Byrne et al., "The Role of the International Fund for Ireland and the European Union Peace II Fund in Reducing Violence and Sectarianism in Northern Ireland," *International Politics*, vol. 47, no. 2 (2010), pp. 229-250.

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