Understanding Adams:

Gerry Adams and the Good Friday Agreement

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Course: UNIV 1004

Date: April 5th, 2021

Word Count: 1942

Gerry Adams is a Northern Irish politician commonly associated with the Republican Movement in Northern Ireland. He was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 1948 and was the leader of the Sinn Fein Party from 1983 to 2018.[[1]](#footnote-0) Sinn Fein is a Republican party that advocates for the unification of the island of Ireland as one independent country.[[2]](#footnote-1) As the leader of Sinn Fein and as an influential figure in The Troubles, Adams was involved in the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA). This agreement, signed on April 10th, 1998, was created to bring peace and to establish conditions in which Republicans like Adams, and Unionists could live and govern together.[[3]](#footnote-2) Politics in Northern Ireland are very complicated and controversial. As such, this essay will focus solely on the GFA and the views of Adams and other Republicans. This essay will offer brief historical context, then speak to three aspects that help to define Gerry Adams; knowledge of the GFA, knowledge of his goals for negotiation and his influence on the ratification process. This essay will argue that through these three aspects of the GFA, Gerry Adams’ political identity can be understood.

Before understanding the GFA or Gerry Adams, the political context in Northern Ireland must first be understood. From the 1960s to the signing of the GFA in 1998, Northern Ireland was in a conflict called The Troubles.[[4]](#footnote-3) This was a period of sectarian violence between the Protestant Unionists, and the Catholic Republicans. The animosity from this period emerged from the 1922 separation where the six counties of Northern Ireland were partitioned, and remained part of the United Kingdom while the Republic of Ireland, in the south of the island, formed as an independent nation.[[5]](#footnote-4) This partition meant that the Catholics became a minority in the partitioned Northern Ireland resulting in them being unable to gain political control, and being viewed as second class citizens.[[6]](#footnote-5) The period of The Troubles began in the 1960s as Catholics responded to increasing civil rights discriminations and a lack of a political voice.[[7]](#footnote-6) The Irish Republican Army (IRA), a Republican paramilitary organization, was formed out of this fear as a physical force to resist the oppressive colonial British presence.[[8]](#footnote-7) However, the escalation of violence was reciprocated by the Unionists and The Troubles became a violent and dangerous time, killing more than 3,500 people.[[9]](#footnote-8) Adams and other Republicans saw The Troubles as a fight for national self-determination which was the ability of the Irish people to determine their own government and state.[[10]](#footnote-9) Sinn Fein was a political party aimed at achieving national self-determination and representing the political views of Republicans in Northern Ireland.[[11]](#footnote-10) Adams, as its leader during this time, was responsible for driving its objective and creating its goals. One of the main ways in which he drove the party forward was through his and the party’s participation in the creation and signing of the Good Friday Agreement.

The first aspect to be considered in understanding Gerry Adams is through knowledge of the GFA. This will be discussed in two parts, through understanding the political situation surrounding the GFA, and the two main policies that he felt were of primary importance. The GFA is an agreement that was signed between the governments of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.[[12]](#footnote-11) The citizens of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland then voted on this agreement and it was ratified in a referendum.[[13]](#footnote-12) While not a ceasefire agreement, it brought an end to the majority of the violence in Northern Ireland from The Troubles.[[14]](#footnote-13) The main actors in the signing of this deal were Gerry Adams as leader of Sinn Fein, John Hume as leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), Albert Reynolds as Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister), Bill Clinton as American Presidential Candidate, Tony Blair as British Prime Minister and George Mitchell as the mediator.[[15]](#footnote-14) Adams wanted this agreement ratified in this way in order to gain support from both the Unionist and Republican communities in Northern Ireland, as well as the approval of the citizens in the Republic of Ireland. Adams saw this agreement not as a peace settlement, but rather as a framework in which conflict could be addressed without violence and the country could be ruled with representation from both communities.[[16]](#footnote-15)

The second part to be considered is the two main policies that Adams fought to have included in the GFA. The first was the introduction of a joint executive. This would include a First Minister provided by the largest political party, and a Deputy Minister provided by the second largest political party.[[17]](#footnote-16) The structure of this executive ensured that the minority Republicans were represented.[[18]](#footnote-17) The second major policy that the GFA introduced was the ability of individuals and elected representatives to choose their national identity. Individual citizens could choose their identity through choosing their citizenship; British, Irish, or both.[[19]](#footnote-18) Elected representatives also could choose their identity through self declaration as Republican, Unionist or other, upon election.[[20]](#footnote-19) This enabled them to choose how to define themselves, and ensured that there was cross-community support for any legislation introduced.[[21]](#footnote-20) These two policies allowed there to be representation of all identities and assurance that every voice would be heard in government. Understanding these policies helps to understand Gerry Adams better as it allows for an understanding of the exclusionary political environment he was raised in, how political inclusion was valued, and how being able to freely identity was powerful and seen as important and integral to an identity being accepted.

The second aspect to be considered in understanding Gerry Adams is through knowledge of his goals for the GFA negotiations. This will be discussed in two parts, through understanding the goals that he was able to achieve, and through examining the objective which he was unable to obtain. Sinn Fein and Adams entered the negotiations with four main goals. The first goal was for fundamental constitutional and political change.[[22]](#footnote-21) Prior to the GFA the parliament of Northern Ireland had been run through a system of Westminster Democracy, where the majority of the people can rule the country without regard to the minority.[[23]](#footnote-22) This allowed the Unionist majority who made up 55-60% of the population to rule without input from the Republican minority.[[24]](#footnote-23) Adams wanted the GFA to create a system where the minority would have to be consulted for all decisions.[[25]](#footnote-24) The second goal was for demilitarization.[[26]](#footnote-25) As discussed earlier, The Troubles were a violent time. They were dominated by violent terrorist and extremist groups that either supported the Unionists or the Republicans. Adams wanted demilitarization and de-escalation of the situation so that both communities could live in peace.[[27]](#footnote-26) The third goal was the implementation of the equality agenda.[[28]](#footnote-27) Republicans felt like second class citizens as they were treated badly by the Unionist majority and denied a political voice. They wanted an equal political voice and a structure to ensure they were treated fairly in all aspects of life.[[29]](#footnote-28) The fourth, and most controversial goal of the negotiations, was the release of political prisoners.[[30]](#footnote-29) This was controversial as while both Republican and Unionist prisoners were set to be released, there were more Republican prisoners commonly considered terrorists, a danger to society and thus unfit for release.[[31]](#footnote-30)

The second part to be considered is an idea that was an objective for Adams and Sinn Fein, but not a goal for the talks. This was the idea of an independent United Ireland.[[32]](#footnote-31) While a United Ireland was the ultimate goal, Adams knew this was impossible in the framework of this negotiation. However, he did see the GFA as a stepping stone to Irish unity, and set up mechanisms to allow for a simple majority referendum to allow Northern Ireland to leave the UK.[[33]](#footnote-32) While Sinn Fein and Adams were not able to achieve their objective of Irish unity, they were able to achieve all four of the goals with which they entered negotiations. These four goals demonstrate what Adams wanted politically and give voice to his political ideology.

The third aspect to be considered in understanding Gerry Adams is through examining how he influenced the ratification process of this agreement. This will be discussed in two parts, by looking at the ratification process that he created, and by understanding how he convinced voters to support the GFA. Ratification is the process by which an agreement is approved and in this situation it was ratified by way of a referendum which included the people of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Out of the four main political parties in Northern Ireland three supported the GFA; the two Republican parties, Sinn Fein and SDLP, and the Unionist party, the Ulster Unionist Party The fourth political party, the Democratic Unionist Party, opposed it.[[34]](#footnote-33) Gerry Adams was able to gain the support of 87% of Republican voters for the GFA while 57% of Unionist voters approved of it.[[35]](#footnote-34) This demonstrates that while some cross-community support existed, there was still a split between Unionist and Republican support. Adams was able to influence the support of voters in the Republic of Ireland with 94.4% voting in favour.[[36]](#footnote-35) As there was widespread support for this agreement it was ratified. This cross community support makes the agreement easier to uphold. Adams influenced this agreement by creating the ratification process to ensure the agreement was passed with cross-community support.

The second part to be considered is the way that Adams influenced this agreement through convincing Republicans to support it. A key tenant of the ideology of many Republicans is no British rule.[[37]](#footnote-36) However the GFA maintained some British rule, and Britain retained sovereignty over Northern Ireland. Although not ideal, Adams saw this situation as better than the war of The Troubles.[[38]](#footnote-37) He was able to present this agreement as a good way for Northern Ireland to end the conflict, and as a stepping stone for Irish unity, as the British had been forced to make some concessions.[[39]](#footnote-38) Through this dual approach, and through the immense influence that he held as leader of Sinn Fein and as a leader in the Republican movement, he was able to convince the majority of Republicans and Catholics to vote in support of this agreement. Through examining how Adams insisted on an agreement being ratified, and the arguments that he presented to convince citizens that this was a satisfactory agreement, the ideology of Adams seeking cross-community support and Republican support for this agreement can be seen.

In conclusion, Adams was greatly influential in the Good Friday Agreement, and through looking at this pivotal moment in Northern Irish politics, the political identity of Gerry Adams can be understood. The GFA allows readers to understand the political situation that Adams was experiencing, what his political ideology was, and how he influenced both the creation of this agreement, encouraged its signing, and the ratification of it by citizens. The GFA was one of the most influential moments in Northern Irish politics because it ended the majority of the violence of The Troubles, and established a more equitable political environment for the people of Northern Ireland. This agreement was monumental in Adams’ life. It changed him from a leader who was seen as leading a mere front to the IRA, to a political leader on the world stage who charted a difficult peace process.[[40]](#footnote-39) Since the signing of this agreement Adams has remained influential through his writings and political influence in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland.[[41]](#footnote-40) Despite remaining influential, none of his policies have been as influential or as revealing of his political motivation as the GFA. Thus, the Good Friday Agreement should be seen as both a defining moment in the career of Gerry Adams, and through understanding it, his political ideology can also be understood.

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