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‘The changing nature of British-Irish security co-operation under the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael-Labour governments, 1972-1974’.

Shaun McDaid, Paper presented to the PSAI Conference Liverpool, 11 November 2009.

This paper will examine the politics of British-Irish cross-border security co-operation during the 1972-74 period. In particular, it will consider to what extent the nature of this co-operation changed when the Fine Gael-Labour coalition government took office in Dublin in March 1973. It will also examine obstacles to achieving better security co-operation at the time. An improvement in cross-border security was deemed vital, especially by unionists, if any political settlement in Northern Ireland was to be successful. British-Irish security co-operation during this period is an area which is relatively under-researched.[I will not be discussing issues surrounding the reform of the police, extradition and the ECHR case in a paper of this length, although I do acknowledge their importance].

The availability of archival material in the London, Dublin and Belfast archives now enables a more detailed study of this important subject to be undertaken, although it must be stated that due to the secrecy and sensitivity of security co-operation and the historical proximity of this time period, much information remains inaccessible to researchers. However, there remains enough archival material available to offer some new insights into the nature of British-Irish security co-operation and how the change of government in Dublin affected that co-operation.

To begin, I will briefly examine the political context in Northern Ireland at the time, and outline why an improvement in security in border areas was deemed particularly important to the potential success of any political initiative.

The political and security contexts, 1972-74

Following the prorogation of Stormont by the British government in March 1972, a search for a political solution to the Northern Ireland conflict began in earnest. This process culminated in the explicit acceptance by the British government that any political initiative in Northern Ireland must be based on power-sharing between unionists and constitutional nationalists, and recognise the Irish dimension in Northern Ireland affairs. The Irish dimension was to be recognised by the establishment of cross-border bodies. William Whitelaw’s March 1973 *Northern Ireland Constitutional Proposals* (or White Paper) clearly stated that the British government was ‘prepared to facilitate the establishment of institutional arrangements for consultation and co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland’. The White Paper also stated that the British government was not prepared to accept a local administration in Northern Ireland which drew its support from only ‘one section of a divided community’. This meant that a return to the old majority rule Stormont system was out of the question. A local Assembly was proposed, and elections were held in June 1973.¹

¹ CAIN website. *Northern Ireland Constitutional Proposals*, (HMSO, 1973). Available: <http://www.cain.ulst.ac.uk/hmsocmd5259.htm#4>

The main unionist party, the UUP, was divided over the proposals, although most of the party continued to support Brian Faulkner's leadership. However, during the Assembly elections the UUP formally split into pro-and-anti White Paper factions, known as 'pledged' and 'unpledged' unionists. The unpledged unionists were led by Harry West, the former Stormont agriculture minister dismissed by Terence O'Neill in 1967 for his part in a land deal. Ian Paisley's DUP and Bill Craig's Vanguard party also opposed the White Paper.

The election results were encouraging for the SDLP which won 19 of the 78 Assembly seats. While pro-White Paper unionists were the largest party in the Assembly, a majority of unionists actually supported candidates opposed to the White Paper. This meant that the political initiative would need an extraordinary measure of luck if it was to succeed. Despite these difficulties, the Secretary of State pressed ahead with plans to form a power-sharing Executive, and following discussions lasting over a month between the SDLP, Faulknerite UUP and Alliance Party, the Executive designate was announced on 21 November 1973.²

Two weeks later, at a tripartite conference between the British and Irish governments and the Executive designate, the Sunningdale communiqué was signed. The main points of the Sunningdale agreement were the recognition by the Republic that Northern Ireland was part of the UK and that no change in that status could take place without the consent of a majority there; that a Council of Ireland with 'executive and harmonising functions and a consultative role, and a Consultative Assembly with advisory and review functions'; and a legal commission comprising British and Irish legal experts on how best to deal with those who involved in cross-border paramilitary violence.³

The events following Sunningdale are well known; the Executive took office on 1 January 1974, and lasted little over five months, collapsing in the midst of a loyalist general strike ostensibly in opposition to the proposed Council of Ireland provision of Sunningdale.

Despite the general problem of a lack of unionist support faced by the Executive, security issues were also a significant problem, with border security particularly so. The two years from 1972-74 were the most violent in Northern Ireland's history. In total, 1,043 people died during this period, 54% of deaths were attributable to republicans, 33% to loyalists and 13% to the security forces.⁴ This meant that the chance of the Executive succeeding was unlikely in the context of the communal bitterness inspired by these deaths, a point later noted by Labour's Merlyn Rees, Secretary of State from 1974 until 1976.⁵ Both the Official and Provisional republican

² Richard Bourke, *Peace in Ireland: The War of Ideas* (London, 2003), p. 212.

³ CAIN website. The Sunningdale Agreement. Available <http://www.cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/sunningdale/agreement.htm>

⁴ Jackson *Home Rule*, p. 269. Underscoring this point, Bew, Patterson and Gibbon have shown that 1972 and 1973 'account for a quarter of all deaths from political violence between 1969 and 1990'. Paul Bew, Peter Gibbon & Henry Patterson *Northern Ireland 1921- 1996: Political Forces and Social Classes* Second edition (London, 1996), p. 196.

⁵ Merlyn Rees, *Northern Ireland: A Personal Perspective*, p. 318.

movements opposed Sunningdale and the power-sharing Executive; so too did loyalist paramilitaries.⁶

Why, then, was violence in border areas such an increasing problem? Ironically, this was due to the increasing effectiveness of the security forces in curtailing paramilitary activity in urban areas, particularly PIRA violence. This was a result of the re-establishment of a security force presence in republican areas during Operation Motorman in the summer of 1972, following 'Bloody Friday' in Belfast, when the PIRA detonated twenty-six bombs with inadequate warnings in the city centre. Consequently, due to the increased security presence in urban areas such as Belfast and Derry, PIRA operations began to increasingly take the form of cross-border raids on security installations in Northern Ireland by units often based in the Republic, and as Anthony McIntyre has noted, there was a 'significant displacement of the Republican military machine to the rural areas where support for republicanism was more traditional'.⁷

The area around South Armagh was particularly problematic. Then Secretary of State William Whitelaw at a November 1973 meeting with Garret FitzGerald 'agreed that there had been a shift of emphasis and that the I.R.A. was now operating in border areas, especially in South Armagh/Crossmaglen. (He jokingly remarked that it was a pity that that area had not been put into the south when the border was being drawn and there were some light-hearted exchanges on the pig-smuggling in the area)'.⁸

The fact that these PIRA Active Service Units (ASUs) were based in the Republic made it easier for those units to carry out 'hit-and-run' style attacks and escape back to the Republic, evading capture by British forces. This was the political and security context that pertained during 1972-74. Clearly co-operation on the border would be needed if such attacks were to be curtailed.

How significant was British-Irish security co-operation, and how did it evolve over the course of this period firstly under Fianna Fáil then under the Fine Gael-Labour governments?

Cross-border co-operation under the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael-Labour governments.

The issue of the security of the Irish state was raised in the southern general election of February 1973. Fianna Fáil Minister for Foreign Affairs, Brian Lenihan, was critical of Fine Gael and Labour for not initially supporting the introduction of the 1972 *Offences Against the State Act*, an act which he said was designed to prevent the 'North's anarchy from spreading South'.⁹ The Fianna Fáil Minister for Transport and Power, Michael O'Kennedy, praised his party leader, Jack Lynch, for his 'strong, firm and resolute' action against subversive groups, in contrast to the 'rash, unsure and

⁶ Henry Patterson, *The Politics of Illusion: A Political History of the IRA*, (London, 1997), pp 166, 278. Ian S. Wood, *Crimes of Loyalty: A History of the UDA* (Edinburgh, 2006).

⁷ *The Blanket*, 10 February 2002.

⁸ Meeting between Garret FitzGerald and William Whitelaw, 6 November 1973. N.A.I. Department of Justice (JUS) 2005/24/8.

⁹ Catherine O'Donnell, *The Sunningdale Communiqué and Bi-partisanship in the Republic of Ireland, 1973*, Working papers in British-Irish Studies, No. 81, IBIS, UCD, 2007, p. 3.

unreliable' approach of FG and Labour. It was further argued that Fianna Fáil, under Lynch's leadership, was the 'one party that could be trusted to contain the subversives and preserve peace'.¹⁰ The Irish electorate was unconvinced by these claims, and Fianna Fáil lost its first general election in sixteen years, with Fine Gael and Labour forming a coalition government with a majority of just four seats. Given Fianna Fáil's claims that it was a party tough on subversives, it is interesting to consider the British government's view of security co-operation under the Lynch administration.

Just before the Fine Gael-Labour coalition took power, D.G. Allen of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) informed the head of the Republic of Ireland Department that, 'the security forces in the Republic appear to be reluctant to patrol vigorously near the border and have thereby de facto created a one mile no man's land along the border ... [this] increases the difficulty of apprehending members of ASUs (Active Service Units)'.¹¹ The Lifford area in Donegal was particularly problematic; Allen alleged that members of the Garda seemed 'unwilling to take prompt and decisive action against the IRA in the area and this particular ASU [PIRA Lifford] appears to operate actively without fear of harassment'. In British security circles, there was a 'certain amount of suggestion, although no confirmation exists, that there has been some collusion between the Gardai and the Provisionals'. Allen qualified his remarks by noting that the 'Gardai appear to be armed only with pistols. This may explain in part a lack of enthusiasm to tackle gunmen armed with high velocity and automatic weapons'. The PIRA was seen to be the biggest security threat to British forces in border areas. There was only 'one "renegade" Official IRA unit operating in the border area ... the Warrenpoint/Rosstrevor unit led by Paul Tinnelly, a group that has been disciplined by the Official Council staff in Dublin for carrying out explosives and other operations without permission ... mainly bank robberies'.

However, little over one month after the coalition took office, this soon changed. William Whitelaw met the MFA Garret FitzGerald and expressed his gratitude for 'all the efforts that were being made by the new Irish Government to increase co-operation against terrorism on both sides of the border'.¹² This co-operation included the government secretly handing over weapons seized by the Irish Navy to British authorities for testing. These weapons had been seized from the *Claudia*, a vessel crewed by PIRA members including Joe Cahill of Belfast.¹³ Tests carried out by the British suggested that it was 'virtually certain that the arms from the SS [sic] *Claudia* came from Libya'.¹⁴

On 14 April, the Irish Minister for Defence, Paddy Donegan, informed British Ambassador to Ireland, Arthur Galsworthy, that he had been 'instructed by the Taoiseach to provide us [the British] with the *Claudia* arms we wanted [to carry out tests on]. He stressed that Cosgrave wanted this to be done discreetly and on the basis

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹¹ D.G. Allen to Kelvin White (FCO), 1 March 1973. N.A.U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) 87/247. Subsequent quotations from herein unless stated. ASUs refers to operational units of paramilitary organisations, primarily PIRA.

¹² Meeting between the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland with Dr Garret FitzGerald and Dr Dermot O'Sullivan (Irish Ambassador to the United Kingdom), 4 April 1973. N.A.U.K. CJ4/391.

¹³ FitzGerald *All in a life*, p. 311.

¹⁴ A.J. Craig (Near and Middle East Department, FCO) to Messrs Parsons and LeQueane, 9 April 1973. N.A.U.K. FCO 87/263

that, if asked, the Irish would deny that they had made them over to us'.¹⁵ Donegan assured Galsworthy that the 'Irish authorities would do everything they could to stop bad hats operating in the border areas. The problem was the length of the border and the nature of the terrain'. The Minister then referred to what D.G. Allen had classified as the *de facto* one mile 'no man's land' at the border. Donegan argued that the 'reason Irish troops kept one mile back was because of the dangers of British and Irish Army units firing at each other', which he said would 'delight the IRA'. Donegan also informed Galsworthy that Irish troops listened to British Army radio traffic and were under orders to act if there were any signs of security problems. Galsworthy was clearly impressed with Donegan, commenting that 'the Minister's enthusiasm for clobbering the IRA is to be encouraged'. However, he also noted that a lack of communication between Irish government ministers was hampering the achievement of tighter border security, which suggests that, despite the obvious improvements, significant problems in this area remained. A meeting of Irish and British army experts was proposed to help achieve more practical co-operation at local level.

The Irish government re-assured the British authorities that all available assistance would be given by them to the Northern Ireland security forces. The Minister for Justice, Paddy Cooney, said he had 'instructed the Garda to co-operate with our people in the suppression of criminal activities across the border'.¹⁶ In May 1973, Galsworthy noted that the British had indeed 'noticed the improvement in several areas'. In particular, it was reported that cross-border security co-operation was improving in the troublesome East Donegal area. The British forces argued that this was due to the 'change of government and the departure of Neil BLANEY'.¹⁷

Following the Sunningdale agreement of December 1973, the Irish government was increasingly aware that it would have to enter into more overt security co-operation with British forces on the border, but the domestic political risks to the government if it undertook such a policy were deemed too high to enable the kind of co-operation favoured by unionists, namely co-ordinated border patrols along the frontier. Conor Cruise O'Brien and Paddy Cooney informed Galsworthy that the government wanted to make some kind of gesture 'to help Brian Faulkner' sell the Sunningdale Agreement to the unionist community, and members of his own party.¹⁸ However, O'Brien explained that when overt security co-operation increased:

[I]nvariably members of the Garda and the Irish Army would get shot. This would produce an immediate reaction in public opinion, which would not be what we [the British] expected. Sentimental republicanism was deeply rooted in Irish public opinion, and the reaction would not be to turn against the terrorists, but to accuse the Govt [sic] of bungling and say that at least this sort of thing never happened under Fianna Fáil.

¹⁵ Galsworthy to UKREP Belfast, 14 April 1973. N.A.U.K. FCO 87/247 Subsequent quotations from herein unless stated.

¹⁶ Galsworthy to UKREP Belfast, 6 May 1973. N.A.U.K. FC O 87/248. Subsequent quotations from herein unless stated.

¹⁷ Report by FRG Williams on the State of links as between security forces in Northern Ireland and Eire as at 4 June 1973. N.A.U.K FCO 87/248.

¹⁸ Galsworthy to NIO and HQNI, 21 December 1973. N.A.U.K. FCO 87/248. Subsequent quotations from herein unless stated.

Despite these political constraints, co-operation improved steadily under the coalition government. A December 1973 British report into border co-operation by Colonel C.R. Huxtable, HQ Northern Ireland, confirmed a major improvement in this field. Co-operation in most border areas described as good or very good.¹⁹ Still, the kind of security co-operation which would have been needed to 'sell' the Sunningdale settlement to unionists was missing. While the above quote from O'Brien shows that domestic political constraints were one reason why this was so, were there perhaps other reasons which hindered fuller security co-operation between British and Irish forces during this period?

The British Army as a hindrance to security co-operation

The attitude of the Republic of Ireland towards security co-operation with British security forces in must be seen in a wider context of the performance and perception of the British Army, the RUC and intelligence agencies in Northern Ireland during the period concerned. The tragic events of Bloody Sunday in Derry in January 1972 perhaps had the most serious impact on the potential for cross-border security co-operation. Public opinion in the Republic was outraged by what was regarded as, at best, reckless and irresponsible behaviour on the part of the Army. The fact that allegations of brutality had been levelled at 1 Para over its handling of an anti-internment rally at Magilligan detention centre County Londonderry eight days before Bloody Sunday did little to counter enhance the Army's image.²⁰

Incursions by the British Army into the sovereign territory of the Republic also created obstacles to British-Irish co-operation during this period. From October 1972 until May 1973 there were over twenty-six incursions by land and two air space violations which the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs reported to the FCO. From May to August 1974, nine further such incidents were reported, many involving the presence of heavily armed soldiers. In August 1974, an Aide-Memoire delivered by the Irish Ambassador to the FCO commented on these incidents, and stressed how difficult these made the development of fuller security co-operation. Border incidents, the reported stated, 'inevitably result in tensions between the security forces in Northern Ireland and the Gardaí and could ultimately prove detrimental to co-operation in security matters on the border'.²¹

Another difficult incident for British-Irish relations was the 'Littlejohn affair'. In December 1972, a Dublin city centre bank was robbed by three British men, Robert Stockman and Kenneth and Keith Littlejohn. In the extradition proceedings which followed, the Littlejohn brothers claimed that British intelligence had ordered them to carry out this robbery, which it was hoped would provoke authorities in the Republic to introduce internment of alleged IRA suspects. Following an initial denial of involvement by the British Ambassador, the British authorities later admitted that the brothers had been in contact with their intelligence services.²² The secretive nature of the British extradition proceedings, held *in camera*, contributed to public suspicion about HMG's role in the affair. Indeed, the Foreign Secretary, Sir Alec Douglas-

¹⁹ C.R. Huxtable to NIO and ROI Department, 19 December 1973. N.A.U.K. FCO 87/248.

²⁰ Thomas Hennessey, *The Evolution of the Troubles* (Dublin, 2007), pp 249-51.

²¹ Aide Memoire by Irish Embassy to FCO, 8 August 1974. NAUK, FCO 87/312.

²² *Ibid.*, 203-04.

Home, urged Arthur Galsworthy ‘not to be drawn on why proceedings were held in camera’.²³

In August 1973, the allegations made by the above-mentioned Littlejohn brothers publicly emerged. The Irish government was greatly unimpressed with these revelations, and expressed its disappointment through Sir Arthur Galsworthy. The latter refuted the criticisms made by Garret FitzGerald on behalf of the government. He dismissed the Littlejohn brothers’ criminal past: ‘the IRA was a criminal organisation and ... the kind of people who would associate with the IRA were people of that persuasion ... if he [FitzGerald] asked his own special branch he would surely find that they had informers whose habits and records were none too clean’. The British ambassador used the example of the arms crisis of 1970 as an example of the difficult circumstances faced by the British authorities, and the importance of securing whatever information possible about the IRA. He argued that agents of the previous Irish government had been engaged in ‘organising the supply of money and arms to the terrorists ... under the general aegis of a number of ministers in the government of the Republic’. In such circumstances, he argued, the British government had to gain information about the IRA in any way possible.

The Littlejohn case illustrates the tensions that existed in British-Irish relations. There was still a lack of trust between both sides, preventing the fullest possible security co-operation. This last point was reinforced to Galsworthy by Professor John Kelly, Parliamentary Secretary to the Taoiseach and government chief-whip. He argued that the Irish government had been consistently helpful to the British on security, but that if there is any suggestion that the Dublin government is ‘being made a fool of’ by the British, they would be “‘all back to square one”, i.e. they will neither wish nor be able to afford to co-operate with us on security’.²⁴

The Irish government was also highly critical of the behaviour of the British Army in nationalist areas, specifically the appearance that nationalist residents suffered from ill-treatment at the hands of British troops. Such ill-treatment, the Dublin government argued, invariably caused resentment which ‘apart from other considerations, [led to] increasing support for the Provisional I.R.A.’ The coalition was particularly critical of army behaviour in the Creggan estate in Derry City in August 1974, where ‘thousands of people had been harassed in recent weeks’.²⁵

The above incidents show the extent to which problems existed in achieving the fullest possible cross-border security co-operation. Particularly, it was difficult for the Irish government to engage in overt co-operation, such as joint border patrols, which would have assisted Brian Faulkner to ‘sell’ the Sunningdale agreement to the unionist community. Equally, the Irish government was not prepared to introduce extradition due to the potential difficulties which might be caused by Fianna Fáil about the issue. However, without doubt, covert co-operation was extensive, and improved continuously over the period.

²³ Douglas-Home to Galsworthy 7 August 1973. N.A.U.K. FCO 87/204.

²⁴ For Sir G Arthur from Galsworthy. N.A.U.K. FCO 87/204.

²⁵ Aide Memoire by Irish Embassy to FCO, 8 August 1974. NAUK, FCO 87/312.

Conclusion and assessment

To return to the central theme of this paper – to what extent, if any, did cross-border security co-operation increase following the accession of the Fine Gael-Labour coalition in Dublin? It is necessary to make two points here. Firstly, there are potential difficulties with what might be defined as an ‘improvement’. Also, in highlighting the factors which hindered closer security co-operation it has not been my intention to suggest that the British should be held wholly responsible for this situation. Indeed, as we have seen, there was an argument from the British side that the previous FF government actively supported the IRA and northern unionists clearly felt that the Republic did not act firmly enough against the PIRA. Neither is it suggested, however, that the election of the Fine Gael-Labour coalition was in some way a panacea as far as security co-operation was concerned, or that no co-operation at all took place under the previous government. Problems remained in this field after the 1973 election, many serious.

However, based on the evidence, it seems fair to suggest that co-operation increased significantly under the coalition, and that the British government regarded Cosgrave’s government as more helpful in this field than the previous Fianna Fáil government. It certainly seems unlikely, for example, that the Fianna Fáil government would have agreed to joint meetings between security experts from the RUC and the Gardaí, as the coalition had done in May 1973. A confidential British note written in May 1974 entitled ‘The Coalition and Northern Ireland’ noted that Cosgrave’s government ‘continue[d] to be an improvement on their predecessors. They have better ideas and are trying to put some of them into effect’ even if ‘many of their efforts have been faltering and fumbling’. However, since the Northern Ireland Executive took office, the coalition showed ‘more encouraging signs’ that it was prepared to engage in closer co-operation with forces in Northern Ireland. On all aspects of co-operation the Fine Gael-Labour government was regarded as ‘more active and determined than their predecessors’.²⁶

The archival evidence challenges Paul Bew’s view that the British government’s ‘obsession’ with trying to secure security co-operation from the Dublin government was unrealistic: co-operation under the Fine Gael-Labour coalition was extensive, regarded as generally good by a majority of both Conservative and Labour politicians in London, and certainly an improvement on the co-operation during the Fianna Fáil government’s term of office. However, Bew’s judgement that cross-border co-operation from the Republic was never ‘decisive’ – for the reasons outlined above – appears to be more accurate.²⁷ While difficulties in the area of security co-operation remained under the FG-Labour coalition, these were certainly less serious than those under the previous FF administration. In the final analysis, in terms of increasing border security co-operation during the coalition’s term of office, a lot was done, if admittedly a lot more was left to do, for future governments representing all shades of political opinion and on both sides of the national frontier.

²⁶ Confidential note – The Coalition and Northern Ireland, 28 March 1974. NAUK, FCO 87/248.

²⁷ Bew, *Ireland 1789-2006: the politics of enmity*, (Oxford, 2007), p. 511.