The coalition and cross-border co-operation

Heath returned to the issue soon after Lynch’s government was replaced by a Fine Gael and Labour coalition led by Liam Cosgrave. In a personal message which the new British ambassador, Sir Arthur Galsworthy, delivered to the new Taoiseach on 13 April 1973, Heath referred to the security dossier which he had sent to Lynch and an updated version that Galsworthy handed over to Cosgrave:

The full seriousness of what has long continued has not yet been fully recognized and we were not happy with the response we had to the representations we made your predecessor. There is ample evidence that a number of ASUs have been operating from the Republic with little or no hindrance from the local Gardaí, despite the fact that the people concerned are well known. At regular intervals we gave details of the mounting toll of deaths and other injuries caused by the activities of these units; and we gave names, addresses and other documents. We found the absence of response from the authorities in the Republic extremely hard to understand. Mr Whitelaw has had difficulties enough this past year, and could have done without these terrorist units being allowed freedom of action at his back.¹

Heath asked Cosgrave to agree to a high-level meeting of security experts to work out effective strategies for countering cross-border terrorism. The political context was considered favourable. The introduction of the White Paper setting out the British government’s new framework for the return of devolution to Northern Ireland based on power-sharing and an ‘Irish dimension’ was seen in London as possibly
opening up new possibilities for extracting movement from Dublin on cross-border security.

Initial impressions of the new government were guardedly favourable. The British had given the Irish the intelligence which allowed the interception of the fishing boat, the Claudia, off the Waterford coast, along with an arms shipment from Libya and a number of Provisionals including the leading Belfast IRA man, Joe Cahill. Cosgrave instructed the Minister of Defence, Patrick Donegan, to supply the British with samples of the arms that had been seized on the basis that this should be done discreetly and that, if questioned about it, the Irish would deny that they had handed over the weapons to the British. Arrangements were made for the arms to be brought to Dublin, where they would be handed over to the embassy's military attaché by the Chief of Staff of the Irish army. The day after Galsworthy had delivered Heath's letter and the dossier to the Taoiseach, Donegan had a meeting with the ambassador. He had studied the dossier and told Galsworthy that Cosgrave and he were 'most receptive' to it and that the government would do everything they could to 'stop bad hats operating in border areas'. The problem for the Irish was the length of the border and the nature of the terrain. On direct army-to-army co-operation he explained that the Irish army had instructions to keep a mile back from the border because of the risk of British and Irish units firing at each other by mistake. However, he claimed that Irish units listened in to British army radio communications and if there was an incident they had instructions to move in. Donegan said he would welcome improved co-operation in border areas and as a first step proposed 'an uninhibited exchange of intelligence' on terrorist activities in border areas. In pursuit of this he suggested a 'discreet' visit to Dublin by a senior British army intelligence officer. This would certainly have been unthinkable under the previous government, but it was not clear that it would meet with the approval of Donegan's colleagues. While Galsworthy welcomed the minister's 'enthusiasm for clobbering the IRA', he added that Donegan had emphasised the need for any improvements to remain confidential as publicity would be politically embarrassing to any Irish government. He emphasised that a British protest to the Soviet Union about the presence of Russian-made weapons on the Claudia should not contain any reference to assistance from Dublin.

Anthony Craig has claimed that Cosgrave and Donegan initially kept their actions in regard to the border dossier secret from the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) and the Department of Justice. In fact it is more likely that the lack of co-ordination on the Irish side reflected