The problem of ensuring orderly political succession has been a matter of concern for political thinkers for many hundreds of years. The main concern of the authors of constitutions has been to structure power in such a way that an orderly succession can be established and maintained. It is the conventional wisdom, at a time when the vast majority of newly independent states have already abandoned the structures with which they entered independence, to suggest that such efforts are vain.

The fact is, however, that no authors of a written constitution, however wise and far sighted, can anticipate all the problems which will arise in the future. The United States’ Constitution is unique in its longevity, but even by 1861, when it was put to the test by the American Civil War, it had already been substantially modified by political practice. Political parties and electoral procedures, presidential nominating primaries and the Office of Management and Budget, the federal regulatory agencies and the Panama Canal Company, the National Security Council and the CIA, are all unknown to the Constitution of the United States. And the Constitution has had to be modified to take account of the changing circumstances of the transition itself. In 1789 George Washington had to borrow money to travel to his own inauguration, which, as Congress had not yet assembled, took place several weeks late. Today the moment of transition is timed to the second to determine the precise location of responsibility in the event of a nuclear emergency. The President is dead, long live the President; a monarchical problem for an age which some have feared will result in the creation of a new order in which democracy will imperceptibly have ceased to exist.¹

The apparatus of political change has to cope simultaneously with two problems: the problem of maintaining continuity and the problem of facilitating change.
CONTINUITY

In our examination of political succession we began with the long-established European democracies, and compared and contrasted the experience of some of the newer ones. A striking and significant conclusion from the experience of Europe is that arrangements for political succession can, in favourable circumstances, be very resilient. Despite the two major wars and the turmoil of political ideologies which have swept across Europe in the twentieth century, the major European powers have shown a strong tendency to conserve and restore political succession whenever and however it has been interrupted. France, which since 1940 has undergone occupation, Right-wing reconstruction, war, partisan insurgency, liberation, colonial insurrection, a military pronunciamiento, a Bonapartist regime and a student 'revolt', has often been cited as an outstanding example of political instability. Yet as noted in Chapter 2, despite extensive experience of regime succession, the French have gone on doing the same things in much the same way, and when encouraged to do otherwise, the old habits have tended to reassert themselves. Seen from the perspective of the 1980s it is now the continuity in French politics that impresses the observer, as the Fifth Republic in the age of 'cohabitation' increasingly comes to resemble traditional French parliamentarianism.

Other European countries have no less important lessons to teach us. Ireland, Finland, Czechoslovakia and the Baltic states all had to cope with the problems of nation-building and political change at a time when the ideological turmoil of the post-war world was most unfavourable. Several forms of regime were tried before one achieved consensus. To specify unambiguous procedures for governmental succession was one thing: to have them accepted was another. All were unified only by one factor, in most cases language. All were predominantly agrarian and relatively prosperous compared with the empires from which they had seceded. All emerged into independence at a time when their right to do so legitimately was internationally recognised but when as yet middle-class opinion had got little further than a demand for autonomy. And all confronted the problem of substantial minorities, formerly in the ascendant, and, faced with the challenge of fascism, were to find that their inherent social divisions lent themselves to exploitation in a way that threatened the very foundations of the state itself.