It was during 1990 that the new European agenda at last erupted into British politics. The Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher was overthrown among other things on the issue of Europe. The momentum of integration carried Britain inexorably into the exchange rate mechanism, and questions of economic and political union came to dominate the headlines. Yet one aspect of this process remained Cinderella-like in the background. Although inseparable from all the other elements, it was passed over. Because ‘defence’ was no longer seen to be a contentious issue, the whole security dimension was ignored. In the next chapter the spectrum of British party political opinion on security questions will be set out to show how in general it already mirrored the spread of opinion in other European countries such as Germany. But in Britain, for what can only be called cultural reasons, the political background was missing so that the embryonic debate remained unnoticed, unpublicised and undeveloped. For different reasons it suited the two main parties to play it down, the smaller parties were unable to generate interest and the whole subject was considered by the media to be too complicated, too technical or too unfamiliar to merit full analysis and coverage.

1 THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

‘I spoke to you first as leader of our party in 1975. I remember it so well. Freedom was in retreat; the countries of Eastern Europe seemed crushed for ever under the communist heel. But I said then that we were coming to a turning-point in our history. Few believed it, but that turning-point came in 1979, for we Conservatives were the pathfinders. We didn’t know it at the time, but the torch we lit in
Britain which transformed our country, the torch of freedom that is now the symbol of our party, became the beacon that has shed its light across the Iron Curtain into the East. Today that beacon shines more strongly than at any time this century. You can see it in the faces of the young people from the communist countries who have reached the West. Like most young people the world over, they have resolved to make their own way, to achieve success by their own efforts, to live the life they choose as part of a free world. They are retelling the story of our history. We can't know the direction in which free nations in their future will progress, but this we do know and dare not forget: only those whose commitment to free enterprise and opportunity is a matter of conviction and not convenience have the necessary strength to sustain them. Only those who have shown the resolve to defend the freedom of the West can be trusted to safeguard it in the challenging, turbulent and unpredictable times that lie ahead.¹

This was how the situation was described by the Prime Minister in the autumn of 1989. A year later the same sentiments were expressed at the Conservative Party conference in October 1990 and projected to the country at large in a party political broadcast on 17 October. The sound-track to the broadcast was ‘Land of Hope and Glory’. The brief film purported to thank Central and East European visitors for having accepted an invitation to the conference. In fact it used them to suggest that the Conservative government was responsible for the success of the 1989 revolutions and to discredit Labour Party socialism by associating it with the old communist regimes.

But there was no desire to involve wider discussion about the options that had been opened up as a result. Together with triumphalism about the past went a determination to suppress serious public debate about the future. The domestic political interests of the Conservative Party lay in trying to revive the old British agenda of the 1980s, not entering the uncharted waters of the European security debate of the 1990s. So it was that on 9 October the party chairman, Kenneth Baker, duly told the party conference that Labour had ‘changed the rhetoric but not the reality’ of its defence policy. He accused Labour of being prepared to leave Britain open to nuclear blackmail by abandoning the deterrent in exchange for minor cuts in Soviet forces. On 14 October in her closing speech at the conference the Prime Minister said that the prospect of Saddam Hussein getting nuclear weapons showed how misguided Labour unilateralism was.