Emerging Agendas (1945–59)

At first, the politics of private security in post-war Britain was a relatively low-key affair. For the most part it involved only two actors – Securicor and the Metropolitan Police – and was conducted within a rather informal institutional environment. This was unsurprising given that the basic composition of the security sector had not been seriously reconsidered within government circles since the mid-nineteenth century, when Robert Peel’s new police institutions were accepted into the higher echelons of the British political system (McLaughlin 2007, pp. 4–5). Indeed, the actual negotiations between Securicor and the Metropolitan Police, which lasted for almost a decade, amounted to little more than a series of polite letters and some back-room machinations. No face-to-face contact was made, no ultimatums were issued and no media statements were circulated. Yet, despite this lack of ceremony, these exchanges are extremely revealing and important, for they chronicle the initial, rudimentary formation of the reform and re-legitimation agendas which would come to dominate these political negotiations over the next 50 years. They also glimpse the beginnings of the processes through which private security executives began to slowly and steadily augment the power and legitimacy of their companies within the post-war security sector. This chapter will chronologically trace the development of this early phase of the negotiations.

Core and periphery

From the outset, it is important to set down some contextual information about the Metropolitan Police and Securicor in the immediate post-war era, with a particular emphasis on the way in which the uneven political terrain of the security sector served to facilitate and constrain
the operations of these two actors. Post-war British culture was characterised by a very strong attraction towards state-directed solutions to social problems. It is often remarked that following victory in the Second World War, a profound sense of national pride and a belief in the virtues of the British state permeated the majority of the population. For instance, Le Grand (2006, p. 4) comments that: ‘[the] fact that the country had not only survived the war but had emerged on the winning side was widely ascribed to a spirit of national unity and a selfless dedication to the common cause’. As a consequence, the majority of the British population in the 1940s and 1950s – prompted in no small part by the government and the media (see McLaughlin 2007, Chapter 1) – seemed to be drawn towards the idea of a stable and universal social order guaranteed by the benevolent British state. Indeed, this idea formed a central component of what has since been widely termed the ‘post-war consensus’ (Kavanagh 1985, 1992).

Significantly, the police were commonly considered to be the flag-bearers of this national dedication to a common cause. Reiner (2000, p. 48) captures this status when he writes that ‘by the 1950s the police had become not merely accepted but lionized by the broad spectrum of opinion. In no other country has the police force been so much a symbol of national pride’, and, he continues, despite their necessary recourse to coercion, the police ‘were purported to be accountable through an almost mystic process of identification with the British people’ (p. 55). To be sure, it is important to note that this attraction to the police institution was not – and indeed never has been – universal. Loader and Mulcahy (2003, p. 52), for instance, emphasise that sentiments towards the police have certainly never been homogenous, but have rather been ‘structured by such axes of division as class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and age’. Yet at this point in post-war British history, such divisions were relatively minor, and within this context the Metropolitan Police, as the most distinguished and best resourced police force in the country, was endowed with extremely high levels of power and legitimacy.

The circumstances of Securicor and the nascent private security industry at this time could not have been more different. Securicor has always been widely regarded as one of the pioneering private security companies in Britain. For instance, in their analysis of the British private security industry, George and Button (2000, p. 26) comment that Securicor ‘marked the beginning of the first “modern” security companies’. Draper (1978, p. 19), another commentator on the industry, reinforces this assertion when she writes that Securicor ‘can claim to be the precursor of the modern guard company in England’. Yet in 1945