The Private Security Industry Act 2001 marked the beginning of a critical new era in the politics of private security. For more than half a century, the pro-regulation reformers and re-legitimators had been advancing their respective agendas on the assumption that regulation would bring with it certain benefits. The reformers were operating on the assumption that regulation would serve to increase state control over the industry and give the impression of some kind of state monopoly in the security sector. The re-legitimators were working on the assumption that regulation would have the effect of imbuing the industry with the illusive quality of ‘stateness’ which was so crucial to the everyday citizen’s perceptions about how security ought to be delivered in Britain. However, with the passing of the Act, it was now time to discover the extent to which these assumptions could actually be translated into real-world outcomes. This final empirical chapter will examine this process of discovery and, in doing so, will mark out the terrain of the politics of private security in Britain today.

The Security Industry Authority

The centrepiece of the Private Security Industry Act 2001 was the creation of the Security Industry Authority (SIA), a non-departmental public body which is directly accountable to the Home Office and is tasked with the day-to-day responsibility of regulating those sections of the industry covered by the legislation. The hopes and aspirations of the reformers and re-legitimators have essentially been resting upon the success or failure of this new regulatory institution. A credible, efficient and effective SIA would serve to lay down the foundations for the successful realisation of the reform and re-legitimation agendas, while
an impotent, inefficient and ineffective SIA would serve to frustrate the successful realisation of these agendas and would leave the constitution of the security sector in considerable disarray. This section will narrate the story of the SIA from 2003 onwards, in the process positioning the regulator somewhere in between these two extreme scenarios. The story will be divided into three chronologically ordered phases: ‘the transformation’ (2003–4), ‘false starts’ (2004–6) and ‘back to basics’ (2007–10).

The transformation (2003–4)

This phase is centred around the period of institution building at the beginning of the SIA’s lifespan, before it started to actively regulate the industry. It has been called ‘the transformation’ because in the SIA’s early days its leadership employed highly aspirational rhetoric to describe the intentions of the new regulatory body – this institution, they said, was going to ‘transform’ the industry. For instance, in his foreword to the SIA’s first Annual Report, Peter Hermitage, the SIA Chairman between 2003 and 2006,1 wrote the following:

there is still a long way to go before the private security industry is viewed with trust by the general public, as a partner by other enforcement authorities, and as making a real contribution in the fight against crime. Key to this is nothing less than the transformation of the industry – eradicating criminality, increasing professionalism and skills, improving career paths and employment prospects, providing reassurance for security users and for the wider public. (Hermitage 2004, p. 2)

In his accompanying foreword, John Saunders, the SIA Chief Executive between 2003 and 2006, continued this ambitious theme:

perhaps the Act’s most important contribution is that it provides sound foundations for introducing fundamental change, creating a private security industry that is healthier, more successful, dynamic and fit to pursue new market opportunities. Above all, an industry that is respected and proud of its reputation. (Saunders 2004, p. 6)

These statements are interesting because of their scope. The Private Security Industry Act 2001 sets out the regulatory mechanisms for achieving two primary objectives: to reduce criminality and to raise standards in the industry. On the surface, these stated objectives are more directly