

Magna Carta 800th anniversary to be marked

It's 800 years since Magna Carta, a charter of free men's rights, was sealed. As British politicians consider scrapping the Human Rights Act, how valuable are written declarations of rights?



How liberty began? The four remaining copies of Magna Carta were brought together this year.



Four and a half thousand people will gather in a quiet corner of Surrey this morning with the eyes of the world upon them. At Runnymede, a water-meadow by the River Thames, they will honour the first time it was accepted that even the monarch was subject to the rule of law. It is the 800th anniversary of the sealing of the Magna Carta.

The occasion has sparked global celebrations, with a particularly wide range of events taking place within the UK. A flotilla sailed up the Thames and services were held in several cathedrals this weekend; lectures are being given on the subject at venues such as the British Library this week; mass participation events include yesterday's LiberTeas and today's Beer Day Britain; and a campaign has been launched to make 15 June a national holiday.

Magna Carta was the product of unstable times. King John had angered his Barons, particularly by raising taxes

to fund unpopular wars, and leading figures in the Church, especially by trying to choose the Archbishop of Canterbury. With civil war looming, the Barons presented a weakened John with a charter which would become a cornerstone of Britain's constitution.

It has often been seen as a pioneering liberal document which set out basic rights for free men and gave inspiration to movements which have defined western history, such as the late 18th-century revolutions in the United States and France and campaigns to extend the right to vote. And its demand for habeas corpus — the right not to be imprisoned without trial — still plays a key role in political discussions over issues of justice today.

But Magna Carta was the product of its time and some of its clauses now appear to fit less comfortably with the prevailing view. The call for limits on the amount of money which could be paid back to Jews

have been linked with violent pogroms in the summer of 1215. And the charter said little about women, save from banning them from making certain accusations in court.

ENDURING PRINCIPLES?

Some pressure groups and commentators argue that the anniversary should remind us of the value of writing down our non-negotiable rights. It is remarkable that Magna Carta has endured through some of the darkest periods in history, including civil and world wars. British politicians currently considering diluting human rights legislation should take particular note.

But others see this view as an oversimplification. Most of Magna Carta's clauses are now obsolete and of those that remain even trial by jury is questioned by some who think a fair trial is impossible. Better to establish principles for citizens' rights and to avoid codifying overly rigid or idealistic laws.

Q & A

Q Is Magna Carta still relevant today?

A It still features both directly and indirectly in a great deal of political discussion. We can expect its principles to be central to the debate over the Human Rights Act. The government's desire for new counter-terrorism and counter-extremism legislation — often

referred to as a 'snooper's charter' — will also raise issues around human rights and the proper limits of government.

Q How can I take part in marking the anniversary?

A Have a look at the events on the Magna Carta 800th website to find something local to you — there are lots of activities going on this week and beyond. The British Library is also running an interactive pro-

gramme to try to build a Magna Carta for the digital age (see the expert links) — you can vote on a range of proposed clauses.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'We cannot trust politicians or the process of politics to preserve liberties.' David Davis MP

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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WORD WATCH

The Church – The well-timed revelation this weekend that two of the surviving copies of Magna Carta were written by men who worked at Lincoln and Salisbury cathedrals highlighted the level of antipathy towards John among the clergy.

A weakened John – John would soon annul Magna Carta, with the Pope's support, saying he had

signed it under duress, but it was re-issued after his death in 1216, an act repeated several times. King Edward I permanently embedded Magna Carta in English law in 1297.

Late 18th-century revolutions – The American and French revolutions are also largely seen as products of the Enlightenment of the 1700s, when radical thinking emerged about individual rights and the modern

ideology of liberalism was born.

Certain accusations – Clause 54 forbade women from accusing a man of murder or manslaughter, unless it was her husband.

Considering diluting human rights legislation – The Conservative government has said that it intends to abandon Britain's Human Rights Act, leave the European Convention on Human Rights and bring in a British Bill of Rights in their place.

YOU DECIDE

1. Has the world earned the right to celebrate the Magna Carta anniversary?
2. Is it important to write down our rights?

ACTIVITIES

1. Create an advert encouraging people to take part in the Magna Carta celebrations. Alternatively, produce an advert calling on the government to make 15 June a national holiday.
2. Prepare a three-minute speech to the United Nations on the state of human rights around the world. What achievements have been made in the last 800 years, and what still needs to be improved?

 **BECOME AN EXPERT** Check our website for a selection of useful links to videos and further reading.

