

MAGNA CARTA, THE CITY OF LONDON, AND THE 'SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP'

Read by Sir Robert Worcester, KBE DL

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I am delighted to be here in the City of London and honoured by its Guildhall Historical Association to share with you my thoughts as we start the 800th Anniversary Year of Magna Carta. I would speak about three things: Why me and why now? Second, Why are you here? And third, why commemorate the 800th anniversary of the sealing of the Charter of the Barons as some call it, others Magna Carta, Great Charter?

But first, much thanks to the City Corporation for its support of the Magna Carta Trust over many years, and especially for the help and advice of Tony Halmos who sits on the 800th Committee, the Anniversary Day Senior Project Board, and the Chancellor's Grant Allocation Committee and who also chairs the Communications Sub-Committee.

Why me, why now?

Growing up in America I had a pretty thorough schooling in English history, English literature and not least English cinema (that was before television), which began with the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, then 1066 and all that, in 1215, the Great Charter, later *Magna Carta*.

From an early age it was "Good" King Richard the Lionheart, "Bad" King John "Lackland" (and Robin Hood and his merry men, Little John, Friar Tuck, Will Scarlet and all), Henry VIII and Elizabeth the Virgin Queen, Shakespeare, 18th century Georgian elegance in costume, in architecture and music. And as a teenager, the Ealing comedies, *Lavender Hill Mob*, *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, *Whisky Galore*, and the rest. Must have seen them all, and some four or five times.

I grew up with the belief that 'the sun never sets on the British Empire'. And did I collect stamps from all over the British Empire!

All Americans knew then and now that George Washington, John Adams, John Jay, Benjamin Franklin and nearly all the Founding Fathers were at the time Englishmen (Alexander Hamilton was a Scot).

I first saw Magna Carta at the New York World's Fair at the British Exhibition where Lincoln's 1215 copy was displayed. I was 7 years old. On my first visit to Britain, in 1957, I was a serving officer in the US Army Corps of Engineers,

returning to America to be discharged after serving in Korea, my tour of duty completed.

On my first day in London I went first to the British Museum to see two things, the Magna Carta and the Rosetta Stone, which to me represented the two icons of civilised society: the rule of law and communication outside the village.

I became a Trustee of the Magna Carta Trust 21 years ago (when I became Chairman of the Pilgrims Society). The Chairman of the Trust, by Charter was the Master of the Rolls, first the late great Tom Bingham, Lord Bingham, then Lords (Harry) Woolf, (Nicholas) Phillips, (Anthony) Clarke, (David) Neuberger and now (John) Dyson, all distinguished jurists. First under Lord Neuberger and now Lord Dyson, I now serve as Deputy Chairman of the Trust.

It was Tony Clarke and David Neuberger who ganged up on me and gave me responsibility for organising the 800th Anniversary Commemorations.

How could I refuse?

Magna Carta and the City of London

We sit but a shout away from the City of London's 1297 exemplar of Magna Carta in its position of pride in the new Guildhall Heritage Gallery. You are Historians, some perhaps even educated in medieval history, others interested in other aspects of the City of London heritage and history of different periods, yet others, like me, educated in other, if allied, social sciences. But all of us here today pleased to have the advantage unavailable a century ago when the 700th anniversary of the sealing of Magna Carta wasn't commemorated in 1915 due to the War, other than in the excellent, but long out of print, Royal Historical Society produced book of Magna Carta Commemoration essays, edited by Henry Malden, Hon. Fellow, Trinity Hall, Cambridge and Hon. Secretary, Royal Historical Society.

My predecessor, the then Chairman of the Magna Carta Celebration 1915 Committee 100 years ago, was The Rt. Hon. Viscount Bryce, OM, DCL, LLD, FRS, FBA. Today I stand on the shoulder of a giant. While the war on terrorism goes on today, it is a far cry from the depths of 1915, and reminds us that the link between the military and other security forces and Magna Carta is the defence of liberty and the rule of law.

The City of London has for over 1,000 years made those links. Certainly 800 years ago this coming June. Professor McKechnie, whose Magna Carta address (1215–1915) is in the Malden book, put it this way. (Malden, pp. 4–5)

“On 5 May (1215) the barons, having chosen as their leader, Robert Fitzwalter, acclaimed by them as “Marshal of the Army of God and Holy Church,” performed

the solemn feudal ceremony of diffidatio, or renunciation of their fealty and homage, a formality indispensable before vassals could, without infamy, wage war upon their feudal overlord. Absolved from their allegiance at Wallingford by a Canon of Durham, they marched on London, on the attitude of which all eyes now turned with solicitude.

“When the great city opened her gates to the insurgents, setting an example to be immediately followed by other towns, she practically made the attainment of the Great Charter secure. The Mayor of London thus takes an honoured place beside the Archbishop of Canterbury among the band of patriots to whose initiative England owes her Charter of liberties.”

Arlidge and Judge (2014) develop the scenario and add colourful detail.

“London did not institute the rebellion, but effectively joined it on 17 May 1215 when the rebel barons were admitted within its walls. It already had ... an eye for the main chance. ... When Richard I came to the throne in 1189, he almost immediately departed on crusade, leaving his Chancellor, William Longchamps, at the head of the government. When John and a party of barons opposed his rule, the citizens of London supported John and recognised him as supreme governor of the realm; they swore that if Richard died without issue they would support John’s claim to the throne. In return he recognised their commune. When Richard returned from the Holy Land, the citizens politically offered 1,500 marks towards his ransom. In 1215 they again turned turtle and supported the baronial rebels against John.”

Hindley (1991) developed the story in his earlier, most detailed especially about London, book.

“From the moment they occupied the city, the opposition barons found firm friends and allies among London’s leading men. The Articles of the Barons contained important clauses aimed to protect London interests, and most of these are to be found in the Great Charter, if in modified form. There were omissions, the most serious concerning the Londoners’ liability to tallage. This was the purest form of protection money, levied at will and without appeal by king or lord from townsman or serf, village or city. It was particularly loathed because it was arbitrary, could be extortionate, and was a badge of inferior status.”

You believe in freedom. When I mention Magna Carta to people who believe in freedom, anywhere in the world, their eyes light up. I’d like to start by testing your knowledge of Magna Carta. Who can tell me where it was signed? How many agree?

[Wrong, it wasn’t, it was ‘sealed’!]

There are many myths which surround the Magna Carta. That it was only a fight between the Barons and the King. It certainly was, but not only that.

It was the beginning of the spread of modern democracy. Magna Carta was the overturning for the first time of 'divine rule' (King John, and somewhat later, King George III's power over the American colonialists), the beginning of representative democracy, and as Lord Judge, the former Lord Chief Justice of the United Kingdom, recently quoted:

"Nullum scutagium vel auxilium ponatur in regno nostro nisi per commune consilium regni nostri", which very roughly translated into American means 'No taxation without representation'. Now which historian, which lawyer, which American, hasn't heard that phrase before?

Did you know that Americans abroad were the last to be franchised? And when? On 7 January 1977 President Ford signed (not sealed) the Overseas Citizens Voting Rights Act after we lobbied Tip O'Neill, then Speaker of the House, when we got five minutes with him in 1974, and pleaded 'no taxation without representation'. Before 1977, Americans abroad still had to pay taxes, but had lost the right to vote by moving overseas.

And it was the foundation of human rights, under threat now at home and abroad, as we consider how to cope with the threats which face us in the 21st Century. And civil liberties, as protected in the American Constitution.

Magna Carta enshrined the Rule of Law. It limited the power of authoritarian rule. It paved the way for trial by jury, modified through the ages as the franchise was extended.

Magna Carta proclaimed certain religious liberties, *"The English Church shall be free"*.

Magna Carta is England's greatest export.

Now affecting the lives of nearly two billion people in over 100 countries throughout the world. For centuries it has influenced constitutional thinking worldwide including in many Commonwealth countries, even in France, Germany, and Japan, and throughout Asia, Latin America and Africa.

Over the past 800 years, denials of Magna Carta's basic principles have led to a loss of liberties, of human rights and even genocide, taking place yesterday, this morning, today and tomorrow.

It is an exceptional document on which all democratic society has been constructed, described by the former German Ambassador when he said to me that everybody in Germany knows about the Magna Carta, it is *"The Foundation of Democracy"*.

Thirty-eight years ago, in all their splendour, the House of Commons Speaker and House of Lords Speaker, MPs and Peers, Law Lords, Ambassadors and High Commissioners, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, met with the senior members of the American Congress and Senate assembled in the 1,000 year old Palace of Westminster's Westminster Hall to deliver a gold-embossed reproduction of the Magna Carta. Then, in June 1976, representatives from England travelled to the Capitol to present Congress with an additional gift: a one-year loan of an original 1215 Magna Carta to be displayed in the Rotunda of the Congress of the United States. I was there.

This time the plan is to have the Supreme Court organise a 'mock trial' with judges, jury and advocates, mainly from Commonwealth countries, judging barons and bishops in the dock on the charge of treason to be telecast and broadcast on BBC World. This will be on 31 July, the night before the Supreme Court Magna Carta Exhibition opens for August and September. Prior to this, starting in March, the British Library will have the biggest exhibition it's ever held.

There will be exhibitions and demonstrations, pageants and concerts, sound and light shows, seminars and symposiums, open lectures and plays in the Magna Carta Towns, in cathedrals and castles, town halls and town squares throughout the land here. There will be many exhibitions and events in Canada and the USA, France and Germany, Poland and Trinidad and throughout the Eastern Caribbean, in southern Asia, Africa, Australia and New Zealand, and everywhere that values the principles that the Barons wrenched from the King at Runnymede. They had to fight for it, and we are the beneficiaries of their fight. The ever expanding list of events is kept up to date at www.magnacarta800th.com/Events.

You can follow the commemoration of the 800th by signing up to the Magna Carta Newsletter at our website and tell us if you'd like to get involved, at www.magnacarta800th.com. And I hope some of you will be with us at Runnymede and some as well in Westminster Hall for the mock trial at the end of July, or at least watching it on BBC World and I hope PBS in the USA, ABC in Australia, and in Canada on CBC as well as well as in many countries' TV stations, on the Internet, and elsewhere throughout the world.

Finally, I did want to share with the Historians, who represent literarily hundreds of years of service to the City and to this country, my belief as a true Anglo-American that the values enshrined in the Magna Carta and its legacy are largely the reason for the existence of the 'Special Relationship' that bonds my two countries, Britain and America, two countries which have fought two World Wars and many other, smaller, conflicts shoulder to shoulder in defence of liberty. The City of London over centuries has fostered the Special Relationship.

President Obama observed in 2011 in a speech to the British Parliament:

“our system of justice, customs, and values stemmed from our British forefathers. Our relationship is special because of the values and beliefs that have united our people throughout the ages. Centuries ago, when kings, emperors, and warlords reigned over much of the world, it was the English who first spelled out the rights and liberties of man in Magna Carta.”

Thank you.

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