

The British Library's Magna Carta exhibition: A vital though flawed presentation

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Unprecedented numbers have visited the largest exhibition ever held on the Magna Carta, presented at the British Library in London, 800 years after the “Great Charter” was sealed at Runnymede Meadows near Windsor, England.

The Magna Carta is recognised by millions as a powerful symbol of civil liberties. It was sealed by King John in June 1215 and was “a major historical event in the social and political development of England and in the emergence of the rule of law against arbitrary power,” as the *World Socialist Web Site* noted on that date this year.

The exhibit attempts to show how the impact of the charter resonated through world history. It features a breathtaking array of documents of world-historical significance, brought together for a public audience for the first time. A number of leading experts were commissioned to produce extensive new commentary on the origins, context and legacy of the document.

The exhibition has panoramic scope. Spanning a millennium, it traces forward from the medieval origins of the Magna Carta to the modern world. The bulk of exhibits show how it inspired social movements and formed a foundation stone of bourgeois democratic constitutions.

The exhibit begins by explaining the context and precedents from which the Magna Carta emerged. Its authors appealed to a legal tradition rooted in the relative freedoms of the tribal society of the pre-feudal kings. Stunning Anglo-Saxon manuscripts feature law codes written in Old English. Precedents to the Magna Carta are displayed, such as writs and coronation oaths issued by previous kings promising stable and fair government. In contrast, the tyrannical rule of King John was characterised by constant crisis and brutality, as highlighted by chronicles and artworks in the exhibit.

The exhibit shows the events leading up to King John's concessions at Runnymede after the victory of the rebellious barons. The granting of the charter is shown in international context, as John struggled to keep the pope onside and reclaim his hereditary French territories.

The charter was quickly annulled by the pope and was largely forgotten about until it was revived by John's successor. A church document condemning the rebels and artefacts of John's death and the subsequent civil war and French invasion are displayed. The 1225 Magna Carta of Henry III is shown, which became the authoritative version. This charter was paired with the new Forest Charter, which scaled back the royal forests and protected commoners' rights.

Two of the four surviving original 1215 charters are displayed, alongside fascinating artefacts such as the Articles of the Barons, the draft document prepared during negotiations at Runnymede as the king was held under duress.

The exhibition details the content of the Magna Carta, which combines mundane details relating to the administration of the feudal state with sweeping statements of political principle. The key clauses in the Magna Carta are numbers 39 and 40, which remain in effect today, and read:

No Freeman shall be taken or imprisoned, or be disseised of his Freehold [expropriated], or Liberties, or free Customs, or be outlawed, or exiled, or any other wise destroyed; nor will We not pass upon him, nor condemn him, but by lawful judgment of his Peers, or by the Law of the land.

We will sell to no man, we will not deny or defer to any man either Justice or Right.

This reads as a declaration of universal rights. However, the document was a product of historical conditions and has a specific class character. It largely stated the interests of certain social layers within feudal society, giving them greater legal and economic freedom to exercise their property rights. These rights applied only to a minority, the “freemen” who owned land, and entirely neglected the peasantry who remained legally and economically downtrodden.

The Magna Carta was the outcome of a struggle between the monarchy and the barons, supported by sections of the church hierarchy, which reflected social tensions generated by tectonic shifts in the economic and social structure of feudal society in the 13th century. It portended the increasing conflict of feudal legal forms with the rising bourgeois society based on social relations dominated by money, trade and production for the market.

The charter prefigured and inspired the bourgeois-democratic revolution, the struggles of the rising bourgeois class against the decaying feudal aristocracy. These 17th and 18th century revolutions transformed the significance of the Magna Carta, which provided a precedent for Enlightenment ideals of universal emancipation.

During the English Revolution, the Magna Carta was rediscovered and interpreted by legal theorists and revolutionaries and emerged as a banner in the struggle against monarchical despotism. Before the Civil War erupted in 1642, Parliament issued the Petition of Right in 1628, displayed here, insisting that the king obey the rule of law based on clause 39 of the charter. The drama of the Civil War is conveyed by a civil war banner depicting the charter itself.

The left wing of the revolution, the Levellers and Diggers, drew from the universal themes of the charter. Documents show the trial of John Lilburne, a Leveller and officer in parliament's New Model Army, whose name became synonymous with the fight for freedom of the press. Lilburne based his principles on the charter, saying:

“I am a freeman, yea a free-born denizen of England... and I conceive I have as a true a right to all the privileges that do belong to a freeman as the greatest man in England, whosoever he be ... and the ground of my freedom, I build upon the Great Charter of England.”

Later the “Glorious Revolution”, the overthrow of James II and his replacement by William III (William of Orange), resulted in the drafting of the Bill of Rights of 1689. The Bill of Rights, displayed in the exhibition, limited the rights of the monarchy that had been restored

following the death of Oliver Cromwell, who led the parliamentary armies in their victory in the civil war.

The visitor proceeds through the mass upheavals of the late 18th century in Britain's American colonies and in France, whose revolutionary government issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, also on display. The United States Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights are shown in the original for the first time in Britain. All these documents have legal roots tracing back to the Magna Carta.

The British Library's curators begin to flounder and give voice to reactionary conceptions as they move to an examination of the modern period. As capitalist society developed, characterised by massive social inequality and brutal exploitation, the material class interests that lay behind the ideals of the bourgeois democratic revolution were exposed.

The historic task of the universal emancipation of humanity passed to the newly-emerging proletariat, a struggle that found its highest expression in the Russian Revolution of October 1917, which overturned capitalist rule through a conscious political movement led by the Bolshevik Party under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky.

As the true nature of bourgeois democracy became clear, the traditions associated with the Magna Carta were adopted by an increasingly powerful workers' movement in the 19th century. Historian Alexander Lock, who contributed to the exhibit, explains, "Where once Magna Carta had been enlisted by Parliament in its struggle for supremacy over the Crown, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reformers used it to challenge the very authority and power that the unrepresentative Parliament had won." The exhibit conveys this history engagingly.

Lock explains, "When the Great Reform Act of 1832 was passed, granting new political rights in the form of a limited extension of the franchise, it was explicitly presented as a new Magna Carta."

Significantly, the Chartists, the first working class revolutionary movement, derived their name from the "People's Charter," a list of their six demands.

The exhibition examines the contradictory history of the Magna Carta during the period of Britain's world domination. It was a potent symbol of resistance to colonial oppression, but was also used to boost Britain's national myth of a "civilizing mission" and the economic claims of "freeborn Englishmen." A letter demonstrates British civil servants' concern that a proposed "Magna Carta Day" might stir rebellion among the colonial masses.

The exhibit portrays the major historical events of the 20th century as part of a constant expansion of civil liberties. Ignored are the historic convulsions of the world capitalist system and resultant class struggles or any explanation of how this again and again forced the bourgeoisie to abandon democratic forms of rule.

Various exhibits show how various movements adopted the mantle of Magna Carta to further their cause. The Suffragettes invoked its legacy in their publications. Opponents of an emerging British fascist movement referenced the charter in their propaganda. Fascist supporters also cited the document in defence of those interned under Defence Regulation 18B during World War II.

The "democratic" imperialist powers attempted to turn the charter to their purposes during the Second World War. The exhibition describes how the government of arch-reactionary Winston Churchill wanted to gift one of the remaining charters to the US government as a propaganda tool and to cement their alliance.

The legacy of the Magna Carta was again invoked to provide a democratic fig leaf for the postwar order established under the aegis of US imperialism, on the basis of the suppression of revolutionary struggles by the Stalinist bureaucracy that had usurped power in the Soviet Union. The exhibit displays modern constitutional documents, each with small sections of text echoing the original charter. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which led to the European Convention on Human Rights

and the UK Human Rights Act 1998, are all on show.

This is all presented uncritically. Video screens present right-wing politicians such as former US President Bill Clinton and senior Conservative William Hague as credible representatives for the rule of law. Hague is a leading figure in a government that plans to scrap the Human Rights Act. As Foreign Secretary, he attempted to cover up the British state's cooperation with the CIA's illegal rendition programme. In 2012, he rejected granting political asylum to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

The exhibition shows a couple of satirical cartoons dealing with the period of the New Labour government of Tony Blair, widely hated for its warmongering and raft of "anti-terror" laws that undermined basic democratic rights. One cartoon shows a demonic Tony Blair displaying his "Mini Carta" next to the time-worn Magna Carta. Another depicts former Labour Home Secretary Charles Clarke saying, "Magna Carta? Habeas Corpus? You can tell by the dodgy foreign names you'd be safer with 'em locked up!", while depositing a key in his cleavage.

Outside of this, however, there is no examination of the significance or causes of the ongoing undermining of essential democratic rights.

The exhibition provides a clear, powerful overview of the world-historical struggle for democratic rights, beginning in embryo with the Great Charter. Despite the flawed presentation of the history of the post-World War II period, it is a powerful depiction and stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing contempt for democratic rights and profound historical questions in the media and academia.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted:

With unspeakable hypocrisy, Western governments, aided and abetted by a compliant corporate media, are, at the same time, commemorating the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta and claiming to represent its heritage. In reality, the list of core rights enunciated in the Charter stands as an indictment of world capitalism.

The popularity of the exhibition has been significant, demonstrating the widespread concern about the trampling of basic democratic rights by successive governments of all political stripes. Over 30,000 participated in the British Library's public poll to determine the contents of a "Magna Carta for the digital age," raising issues of freedom of speech and surveillance. In May, artist Cornelia Parker exhibited a 13-metre long embroidery of the Magna Carta, enlisting help from contributors including Edward Snowden, who stitched the word "liberty."

These sentiments can find no support in any section of the corporate-financial elite. Indeed, modern society increasingly resembles the *Ancien Regime* of pre-revolutionary France.

Little remains of the basic rights enshrined in Magna Carta. Today, capitalism threatens to plunge humanity, once again, into the horror of economic breakdown, dictatorship and world war.

Successive governments have eviscerated democratic rights and increased their repressive powers to prop up the decaying social order.

The struggle for the defence of democratic rights requires the assimilation of the lessons of history. The vast experience shown through the British Library exhibit in fact demonstrates that democratic rights can only be secured by means of the class struggle.

Today, the defence of these rights can only be secured through the mobilisation of the international working class against capitalism. The universal emancipatory project with roots in Magna Carta and the Enlightenment project can only find fruition through the socialist transformation of society, based on new forms of genuine democracy that secure peace, justice and social equality to all.



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