



The UK's constitution is uncodified, meaning that there is no one document that sets out its fundamental principles and precedents according to which it is governed. Eight centuries after the Grand Charter was signed, **Daniel Regan** asks, is it time for a new Magna Carta?

June 2015 marks the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta, widely recognised as one of the founding documents of England's legal system. Since 2013, LSE's Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) has been reassessing the Grand Charter's legacy and examining its contemporary significance through a unique crowdsourcing initiative, ConstitutionUK. Its aim: to draft the first codified constitution for the country.

The project has provided some fascinating perspectives on how the Charter is perceived, how it relates to Britain's place in the world and, indeed, the broader question of what it means to be British in the 21st century.

Over the past two years, the team has travelled across the UK, engaging with people from all walks of life to hear what they have to say about how our country should be governed. One highlight was our celebration of democracy, the Constitutional Carnival at LSE. We also held open meetings around the country, including Glasgow, Liverpool,

Nottingham, Portsmouth and Cambridge, and sought views online, launching a major crowdsourcing platform in January as a way to encourage debate and discussion.

Eight centuries after the Grand Charter, ConstitutionUK asked Britons to reassess the nature of the political order and to consider whether it is time for a new Magna Carta. Online at [constitutionuk.com](http://constitutionuk.com), ten topics were laid down for the public to debate. These included broad constitutional questions such as: Is there still a place for the British monarchy in 2015? What rights should citizens have and should those rights be protected in the constitution? Should we remain part of the EU? What are British values and should they be written down in a constitution? The public were asked to generate ideas, to comment, debate and vote on these issues and more, which all fed into a new constitutional text for the UK.

The project has given us insight into how British people feel about the legacy of Magna Carta and about the nature

## ALUMNI VIEWPOINT



As a foundation document of the British system of government, Magna Carta's impact has been felt far and wide over the 800 years of its existence. The former colonies of Great Britain, including most of the democracies across the Commonwealth Caribbean,

have been influenced by some of the principles enunciated in it, such as trial by jury, the writ of habeas corpus and curtailment of the powers of the Crown in its overseas realms, to mention a few.

The 800th anniversary of the sealing of Magna Carta by King John at Runnymede will be observed in the United Kingdom by the Magna Carta 800th Anniversary Committee on 15 June.

In the Commonwealth Caribbean, we will also mark the date. The Constitutional Affairs and Parliamentary Studies Unit of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of the West Indies (UWI) Trinidad has been working to raise awareness about the document's

significance throughout the Commonwealth Caribbean, having been awarded a research grant by the Committee to promote Magna Carta.

The Analysis of the Impact and Influence of Magna Carta on the Commonwealth Caribbean project has been designed to accomplish three objectives: to serve as a Commonwealth Caribbean link to the Magna Carta 800th Anniversary Committee; to provide a platform leading up to the commemoration of the 800th anniversary by holding a series of public lectures throughout the Commonwealth Caribbean; and to raise the level of awareness throughout the Commonwealth Caribbean of Magna Carta in relation to democracy and human rights.

Sir Robert Worcester, chairman of the 800th Anniversary Committee (and former LSE professor and governor) launched the project on 18 October 2014 with a lecture at the UWI St Augustine Campus. Over the past eight months we have held events around the Commonwealth Caribbean, with eminent luminaries including retired judge Sir Brian Alleyne,

former Attorney General Parnell Campbell QC, St Lucian Ambassador to the OECS Dr June Soomer, Sir Marston Gibson, Chief Justice of Barbados, and Sir Dennis Byron, Chief Justice of the Caribbean Court of Justice.

We have been particularly interested in exploring issues around Magna Carta and its application to the Commonwealth Caribbean in respect of the link to human rights and the rule of law, and it has been fascinating examining how this document relates to our present-day constitutions. It may be 800 years old, but Magna Carta is as relevant today across the world as it has always been.

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of the political system today. The discussions reveal something of a schism between those Britons who are largely happy with the status quo and those who are eager to see fundamental change in our political system.

Of those who are happy with the status quo, many are proud of the legacy of Magna Carta, of the Bill of Rights, of Britain's contribution to human rights and of the dissemination of those rights and values through the imperial system. In contrast, those who seek to change the present system often reject this understanding of the legacy of Magna Carta. They dispute the view of Britain as a bastion of human rights and see the imposition of these values on the empire neither as a legacy to be proud of, nor as something that should be part of Britain's future.

What is interesting about these divisions is the questions they raise about values and ultimately about identity. What does it mean to be British in the 21st century? Can one be proud of the legacy of Magna Carta, yet anti-imperialist? Can one be British and at the same time European? What about identifying as republican; does that negate a claim to "Britishness"? What, indeed, does it mean to be Scottish, Welsh, Irish, French or any other nationality?

The way in which people answer these questions often points to the reality that social and cultural identity is as much the product of our familial, educational and social experience as it is of our belonging to some grand national unity.

The question "What does it mean to be British?" is not simply asking us to interpret our past or our present; it is also about how we wish to shape our future. Similarly, questions about the legacy of Magna Carta may reveal little about its historical impact and more about how we perceive that impact today: the vision of Britishness we wish to carve for the 21st century.

These are important questions that often remain unexplored in mainstream channels. Whether the majority of British people seek an entirely new identity through a new constitutional charter remains to be seen. But thanks to this unique crowdsourcing initiative, the IPA has provided – for the first time at LSE – a public platform on a large scale where questions about society, identity, values and the structure of our political system can be examined and debated. ■



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# A political revolution

The British general election produced a shock result. After it had appeared that neither of the major parties could win outright, the Conservatives did just that. **Tony Travers** explains how rumours of the death of majority government proved simply wrong.

**T**he Conservatives' re-election to Downing Street as a majority government was almost universally not predicted. Opinion polls had shown the Tories and Labour locked on 33-34 per cent of the vote for week after week. On the eve of the election, no fewer than ten polls suggested deadlock and the real possibility of a hung Parliament. In the event, David Cameron triumphed while the leaders of Labour, the Liberal Democrats and UKIP had all resigned within 14 hours of the polls closing. The Scottish National Party (SNP) won all but three seats in Scotland.

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition formed in May 2010 had provided a stable majority government for a full five-year Parliament. The relationship between Conservative and Liberal Democrat ministers had been surprisingly harmonious, particularly when compared with the Blair-Brown stand-off which was such a problem for Labour during the previous government.

The need for a coalition stemmed from the 50-year-long decline in Conservative-plus-Labour voting. In the 1955 election, the two major parties won more than 97 per cent of the votes cast. But in 2010, this figure was down to 65 per cent. It recovered marginally in 2015 to 67 per cent. The Conservatives won the recent election with a vote share of 37 per cent (38 per cent in Great Britain), which was somewhat higher than in 2010. For a government party to increase its vote share in this way is most unusual.

Given the pre-election polling, a "win" by either the Conservatives or Labour was expected to mean it would be the largest party, but not with a majority, suggesting that the era of single-party majority governments in Britain was coming to an end. The first-past-the-post voting system, however, where simply having the largest vote share in a

constituency wins the seat, proved instrumental in delivering Cameron a majority.

The election saw the SNP win 56 seats in Westminster with under five per cent of the GB vote. UKIP, by contrast, won one seat with 13 per cent of the vote. The Liberal Democrats were reduced to eight seats with 8 per cent of the vote. While such outcomes are fascinating for political scientists, they are unlikely to foster much confidence among a large section of electorate which is already sceptical (at best) about contemporary democracy.

The new Conservative government will have to set public expenditure and taxation plans in early summer. Chancellor George Osborne remains committed to reducing the budget deficit to zero by 2018-19 and also to cutting taxes. Public spending as a share of GDP is now expected to fall to 36 per cent by 2019. This figure is below the 42-43 per cent average seen over recent decades in the UK and was last seen consistently in the late 1950s.

Moreover, commitments to increase NHS and pensions expenditure, while protecting schools and international development, mean that there will inevitably be continuing deep cuts to defence, local government, police, housing, transport and capital investment. Some of these latter services have been cut by over 25 per cent since 2010. The British State will be radically different by 2020.

LSE held its own "election campaign". Why not visit our General Election blog to see how we covered the contest? **[blogs.lse.ac.uk/generalelection](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/generalelection)** ■



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