



The Story of King John

rule of law:

The principle that all people and institutions are subject to and accountable to law that is fairly applied and enforced.

The idea of the rule of law has been around for centuries. Across Europe, there were times during the medieval period where human suffering and injustice were commonplace, and everyday experiences became a struggle for survival for many people.

Life was tough and inevitably short. To know and understand where the concept of the rule of law originated, we must go back to an historic milestone in 1215.



Charter of Liberties

King John of England ruled in the late 12th and early 13th centuries. After the death of a brother in infancy, he was the youngest of four sons and was never expected to become a king. However, John's father Henry II did not want him to be excluded and awarded John the kingdom of Ireland. This caused great friction between him and his brothers, as they believed all kingdoms were their birthright.

After long and difficult family disputes and rebellions, John rose to power and was finally crowned King of England in April 1199, after the death of his brother King Richard I, known in history as *Richard the Lionheart*.

As a young man, John had developed a reputation for treachery and being ruthless, skills he had learnt after surviving a difficult upbringing. His reign was marked by many disputes with his barons and the Church – a powerful body in its own right. King John was a master in knowing how to plan and conspire against various nobles to get his own way, particularly when he needed to collect taxes. Through years, he spent vast amounts of money fighting territory wars with France, which greatly reduced the state income over a period of thirty years. John needed to collect greater amounts of tax from his people to pay for the expensive crusades. John introduced the first *income tax* on land holders.

Around this time, the law of England under the feudal system demanded that knights pay a heavy fee in order to buy out of military service. It was called a *scutage levy* and it enabled the King to punish knights and barons who refused to join him on the battlefield.



In 1205, King John was involved in disputes with the Church. The high clergy wanted to elect their own people to powerful church positions, such as the Archbishop of Canterbury. But King John insisted that his own representatives take these positions as a move to regain control over his kingdom. The people became angry and supported Pope Innocent III against the King, which created more problems. As punishment, King John then confiscated all church possessions, closed-down places of worship, and demanded taxes be paid from diocese across his lands.

By 1209, the Pope had *excommunicated* John from the Church and threatened stronger action unless he agreed to their terms. This does not sound very serious but being excommunicated by a pope was deemed being abandoned by God and left out of the kingdom of heaven. King John finally submitted and offered to surrender the kingdom of England to God, along with a

couple of saints, and a feudal service fee of 1000 marks paid to the church annually – 700 for England and 300 for Ireland. The pope accepted and the dispute was finally settled in 1213. However, the barons were not happy as the money King John wanted to collect to regain his territories was now too high a price to pay. The barons had nothing left to give. By 1214, King John attempted to raise this levy, but the barons refused to pay.

The barons wrote a document originally called '*Articles of the Barons*', which was a list of rules they wanted King John to sign in order to reach a peace agreement. He rejected their demands. A group of 40 barons, led by Robert FitzWalter (a long-time enemy of the king), marched to London taking over the capital and surrounding areas. King John had no option but to resolve the dispute, deciding to meet with his barons in a field at Runnymede on 15 June 1215. The barons presented the King with their charter which comprised of a collection of 63 clauses.

Some of these included:

- *Access to swift justice*
- *Council agreement for any new taxes*
- *Limitations to the scutage levy*
- *Protection from illegal punishment without evidence*

A council of 25 barons was established to ensure King John kept his agreement with the barons. King John reluctantly sealed the agreement, and the document would later be rewritten as the *Charter of Liberties*.



However, as expected, peace was not to last because John was not used to being told what to do! He particularly did not like clause 61, which stated that an established committee of barons had the ability to overthrow the King if he were to disobey the charter at any time. John quickly sought to break the agreement by presenting his views to Pope. He believed the charter was not only shameful and demeaning, but also illegal and unjust. The Pope agreed and John found himself at war with the barons.

Prince Louis VIII of France eagerly accepted an invitation from the barons to support them in fighting King John. The ensuing war with the barons was long and difficult, and John found himself losing his stronghold. Even some of his own generals were choosing to swap sides to fight alongside the barons.

By 1216, things were looking grim for John, and he was forced to retreat. He decided to take a safe path around the marshy swamp lands of *The Wash*, to avoid rebel held areas. His slow baggage train, which included the Crown Jewels, travelled across the estuary and was lost to the incoming tide. John was devastated. After moving from place to place to avoid being captured, his health soon deteriorated and he died on 19 October 1216.

Upon the King's death, John's nine-year-old son was to become King Henry III. However, Henry was too young to rule the kingdom, so a regent was appointed to make decisions on Henry's behalf until he came of age. The barons switched sides back to the King of England and Prince Louis VIII was forced to return to France. Under King Henry's reign, the charter was amended several times to keep everyone happy. In 1217, Henry finally reissued it as *The Great Charter*, which is Latin for ***Magna Carta***.



King John achieved many things during his reign, but he was a mean and unjust ruler, and rarely kept to his word. Sealing the Charter of Liberties in 1215 is what he is most notably remembered for. This Charter is one of the most celebrated documents in history and has become the cornerstone of democracy across the world to this day.

The **Magna Carta** was not the first attempt to address oppression from a tyrannous ruler. Monarchs all through history have vowed to support their loyal subjects and protect them from all evils as they ascended the throne to begin their reign. But once in power, a ruler has not always kept their promises to the people. There have been many conflicts recorded through history that show societies around the world have stood up and fought in order to achieve freedoms and human rights. The charter is a reminder that the people do remember and attempt to hold the ruling authorities accountable for any injustices they may serve. In England, the coronation oath (section 3 of the Coronation Oath Act 1688) is declared by monarchs to stay fair and show mercy in all judgements. The influence of this act remains relevant today as this oath was taken by Queen Elizabeth II during her Coronation in 1953.

In truth, the Magna Carta consists of many ideas and concepts that have developed over time as a result of different populations suffering at the hands of their ruling authorities. It has also come at great cost and its strength lies in the will and determination of the people to preserve equality and justice to all. It is a reminder that true power lies with the people.

Task 1 Investigate the meaning of the following terms, and create a display board for the classroom:

inheritance	rebellion	treachery	conspiracy
confiscate	homage	clause	justice
provoked	regent	charter	income tax
scutage levy	clergy	barons	dysentery
feudal system	scrupulous	democracy	
excommunication			

Task 2 Create a mini reference pocketbook about the Magna Carta (The Great Charter).

You may wish to use the following ideas to include in your booklet:

- ✓ A brief history of the actions of King John and how his barons created the Great Charter in 1215
- ✓ Definition of human rights and provide some examples
- ✓ Investigate the clauses that make up this great document
- ✓ Include images that support your publication

Task 3 Identify and determine which clauses in the Magna Carta remain relevant for democratic societies today. Explain your reasons why.

Task 4 Create a timeline of events showing the history of King John and how the Magna Carta came to be one of the founding documents for democracy today.

[The Story of Magna Carta](#)

Further Reading

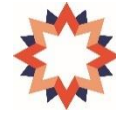
https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_of_England#Rebellion

<https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/medieval-england/magna-carta/>

http://magnacarta.cmp.uea.ac.uk/read/magna_carta_1215/!all



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