

## Constitutional Rights in the UK

On 15 June 1215 – or thereabouts – at Runnymede meadow, lying between Windsor and Staines, King John came to an agreement with a group of subjects who had been rebelling against him. It is now known as *Magna Carta*. Through it John promised to observe certain standards of conduct insisted upon by his aggrieved magnates. ***Magna Carta* has since taken on legendary status in England, the UK and globally as a symbol of democracy and the rule of law. In particular, chapters 39 and 40 of the 1215 text (there were 63 chapters in total, though this numbering was a later addition) are regarded as sources of the principles that punishment should take place in accordance with the law, and that there should be access to justice for those accused.** It is an irony, therefore, that the 800th anniversary of this text should take place when the UK is experiencing problematic constitutional flux.

10 We face pronounced disagreements in many areas. They include membership of the European Union (EU), participation in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and its incorporation into UK law through the Human Rights Act 1998, the role of judicial review in constraining the actions of the executive, arrangements for the governance of the different nations, regions and localities of the UK, and whether some parts of the union should become independent. Interest has risen in the possibility  
15 of introducing a written constitution for the UK, and the House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee has carried out an inquiry in this area.

Since *Magna Carta*, many other texts have set out crucial constitutional principles in writing, such as the *New Ordinances* (1311), the *Petition of Right* (1628), the *Bill of Rights* (1689), the *Treaty and acts of Union between Scotland and England* (1706-1707), the *Act of Union* between Ireland and Great  
20 Britain (1800), and the *Parliament Act 1911* (amended by the *Parliament Act 1949*). In recent times, the volume of written constitutional texts has multiplied. One part of this expansion has come from acts of parliament such as the *European Communities Act 1972*, the devolution legislation from the late 1990s, the *Constitutional Reform Act 2005* and the *Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011*.