**Thursday, 7 November 2013.**

## Magna Carta

### *Question for Short Debate*

**Hansard**

*Asked by****Baroness Boothroyd***

To ask the Chairman of Committees what plans the House of Lords has to celebrate the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta.

**Baroness Boothroyd (CB):** My Lords, one of the team organising the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta said recently that it was a celebration of democracy, which it is. He then added in a private, off the cuff comment, that this probably ruled out the House of Lords being involved, a jibe I resent and deplore. It not only betrays a gross ignorance of the role of this House in Parliament and its place in the constitution, it is also historically bunkum.

The Barons who forced King John to sign Magna Carta in 1215 paved the way for many of the liberties we and millions of others enjoy throughout the world. Of course, those medieval Barons were not democrats, far from it. But they laid the foundation on which our freedoms are based—the rule of law, the limitation of executive power and the rights of the individual.

Look around you, my Lords. Their statues, as filthy and as dirty as they are, adorn our walls. Sixteen of the Barons and two Bishops who were at Runneymede look down on us. They changed the course of history, which is why I want this House and this Parliament to be in the forefront of the anniversary celebrations. Sadly, it will not be, according to the plans so far announced. I am told that my views on this are unhelpful but I make no apology.

Preparations for the anniversary have been underway for several years and one of the key decisions needs to be challenged. The highlight of the anniversary will be the display of all four surviving copies of the original charter in the British Library. Parliament will be a backcloth to the celebrations, not a focal point. True, we have two facsimile copies of Magna Carta in this House. One is in one of our Division Lobbies and has been there for a very long time; the other is in the Royal Gallery, put there recently, courtesy of the noble Lord, Lord Mitchell. But they are not the real thing and the British Library intends to restrict the display of the four surviving originals to allow experts to study them and members of the public who pay to see them, or with free tickets obtained by ballot. I understand that the originals will be reunited for just three days before two of them are returned to the custody of Lincoln and Salisbury Cathedrals. What visible role will this Parliament play in all that? I have yet to be enlightened. I look to the Front Bench to enlighten me on that.

This is rightly a joint Anglo-American celebration. I have to say the Americans have seized the opportunity to show what they owe to Magna Carta with greater enthusiasm than anything so far evident on this side of the Atlantic. The Law Library of Congress will display a later revision of the Great Charter sent from England. Another copy will go to the Houston Museum of Natural Science in Texas, where over a million people are expected to see it. Parliament will have nothing to match that. Yes, certainly there will be events in Parliament Square, a parliamentary education centre if the money can be found, and the annual Parliament Week with its own programme of events, which are all well and good.

But I submit we need to do more, a lot more, to raise public interest and alert the nation to the significance of what happened 800 years ago.

As things stand, my concerns and my fears are that we shall lose a once-in-a-century opportunity to proclaim Parliament’s seminal role in the advancement and protection of Magna Carta’s most basic principles. In many parts of the world, they are still revolutionary principles. Billions of people are denied their basic human rights. Let us rekindle their hope by showing them that change is possible and democracy works.

Let us not forget either that 2015 is the 750th anniversary of Simon de Montfort’s Parliament—another Baron who confronted an over-mighty executive. Let us remember also the monarchy’s role in all this.

The Queen is patron of the Magna Carta Trust, which oversees the celebrations. The monarch is sovereign because the Crown is constitutional. That seed was also sown in 1215 and the monarchy is stronger than ever before.

Previous efforts to involve Parliament more closely have got nowhere. Last December, the noble Lord, Lord Mitchell, asked what plans the Government had for the anniversary. He offered a brilliant idea. He suggested that the four original copies of the charter should be exhibited together for the first time, perhaps in Westminster Hall. The noble Lord, Lord McNally, replied for the Government at that time. “That’s a very good suggestion”, he said. He was sure the organising committee would welcome it. I regret to say they did not and I hope very much they will reconsider. Let there be no doubt about it: the original copies of the charter should be here in Westminster Hall. I will tell you something: if I were still wearing the robes of Speaker of the Commons, I would ask for a joint session of both Houses of Parliament in Westminster Hall to celebrate the anniversary, with at least one of the original charters as its centrepiece. The British Library could surely spare one of its two originals for just one day. We have held joint sessions in Westminster Hall for royal occasions and visiting leaders. What I propose would be no less memorable. I believe the whole world should see Magna Carta honoured where it truly belongs: in the heart of our democracy.

I am delighted to see my colleague, the noble Lord, Lord Elystan-Morgan, in his place this afternoon. When this question was first raised in this House, he said: “Magna Carta … remains one of the most noble documents of human history”.—[*Official Report*, 17/12/12; col. 1335.]

He was right. Let us rededicate ourselves to its principles in a manner that befits this Parliament and safeguards its most precious rights.

**Lord Brooke of Sutton Mandeville (Con):** My Lords, how apt and suitable it is that this ground-breaking debate should have been introduced by the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd, whose most distinguished Speakership of the Commons—the first of her gender—is exactly the right harbinger for the memorable celebrations that stretch in front of us. I am looking forward to hearing about their nature and detail, but I do not think any questions of mine will elicit more information than the noble Chairman of Committees is already going to tell us and of which we have some advance notice from the work programme of the further committees of both Houses that are designing this constitutional jamboree.

I have a personal link to the great events, in that for 24 years—the third longest tenure of any MP for the City of London since 1283—I represented the City in Parliament. The City is the only body specifically referred to in a provision of Magna Carta which still remains in force. It is in section 9, which provides that the City of London, “shall have all the old liberties and customs which it has been used to have”.

Through my City connections, I am aware of one coincidence worth recording. In the great American celebration of 1776, the American Bar Association in 1976 moved lock, stock and barrel to London for its annual gathering. The Drapers’ Company, of which I am a liveryman, invited to its election dinner in July that notable American academic Professor Goodhart, father of my noble friend Lord Goodhart and at that time Master of University College Oxford, who was already co-opted onto a working party of welcome. In his guest-of-honour speech to the drapers, Professor Goodhart, after revealing that he came from a country with drapes but no drapers, and was thus overwhelmed suddenly to meet 200 drapers in a single hall, said that a more naive member of the welcoming party could not tell what all the fuss was about, whereupon another colleague whispered to the professor: “Silly old buffer; he doesn’t realise that it’s because of Adam Smith’s publication of *The Wealth of Nations.*

For an American to be involved was also a bright omen for Sir Robert Worcester—now an Englishman from American roots—being so closely involved in the Magna Carta preparations. The great global law summit—a world-class international conference to be held in London in February 2015—though not, of course, a House of Lords event—is a splendid heir to the American Bar Association’s compliment in 1976.

The one sadness for some of us, perhaps for many and even for all, is that we should have been robbed by death in 2011 of the late Lord Bingham of Cornhill, whose book in 2010, *The Rule of Law*, was an offering to Magna Carta’s greatness and was described by reviewers as so much more than a book for lawyers. I am profoundly impressed by what the Library has served us up with in comprehensive briefing, and I personally commend the slim volume to which these events have introduced me in a splendid series published by Oxford University Press entitled *Magna Carta: A Very Short Introduction* by Professor Nicholas Vincent, professor of medieval history at the University of East Anglia. He has brought home to me how far back the seeds that led to Runnymede were sown and how much rolling of the wicket occurred in the decades that preceded the historic sealing—sealing, not signing—using seals that only the British Library still retains attached to the original charter. So far I have not been able to secure a copy of the late Lord Bingham’s speech in the Guildhall when Tip O’Neill, the Speaker of the House who died so recently, came over. However, I have a copy of the speech Lord Bingham gave at St Albans Cathedral in 2011, the year of his death, the forerunner to Professor Bogdanor’s similar address at the same festival this year.

It is a moment for remarking tiny data that one has noticed: that the 26 right reverend Prelates in your Lordships’ House today exercise the tiniest of majorities over the 25 Barons at Runnymede. It was, of course, a particular implication of chapter 39 of the charter that provided the basis for the creation of the Lords Spiritual as a separate category, as Enoch Powell’s history of the medieval House of Lords tells.

I am delighted that so much of the preparations of the parliamentary working parties are for educational plans, and I have one small suggestion to make. The noble Lord, Lord Bew, heard me suggest that a novel which embraced the G8 summit in Enniskillen this year would have been a suitable vehicle for spreading the word about such events, as did Ian Rankin’s novel about a similar summit held at Gleneagles. This time I shall draw on my own childhood and those of my sons. I grew up with the World War One board games of L’Attaque and Dover Patrol. In due course I found even better the World War Two version entitled Tri-Tactics. They were outstanding in that they were demanding but gentle games which introduced the young to the subtleties of warfare. Later I spent hours on the floor with my sons playing Kingmaker, the similar version for the Wars of the Roses which demanded a grasp of the interstices of strategy. Diplomacy was another version on a wider scale.

Having read the whys and wherefores and the toing and froing of Professor Vincent’s account of the prolonged run-up to Runnymede, I cannot but believe that you could make a highly educational and testing board game. To those who say that board games are passé, I would say that Monopoly and Cluedo are back. One of my grandsons told me that Buccaneer, another in the same genre, was the best birthday present he had had. There is plenty of time to design Runnymede.

In the mean time, I would be the last to describe this debate, which some might equate with what the House of Lords summons inexplicably includes, as “mere motion”. It is a marvellous fount of anticipation. For myself, I am optimistic about the total project and encouraged by the way that the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd, wound up her speech.

**Lord Parekh (Lab):** My Lords, I begin by thanking the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd, for securing this debate and for introducing it with such eloquence and wisdom. When looking at the 800th anniversary celebrations of Magna Carta, it is important to bear in mind four or five features of the charters which are in danger of being ignored.

First, it is not a democratic document. Democracy is the rule of the people. What Magna

Carta does is provide the rule of law. The two are quite different. Happily, Magna Carta introduced the rule of law and, in so doing, it prepared the ground for the liberalism that would eventually prepare the ground for democracy. It has allowed us to consolidate our liberal democracy in the way we have.

Secondly, Magna Carta is the product of the threat of civil war. Some 26 Barons had threatened to take up arms unless King John agreed, but even when he did agree in order to avoid civil war, the Pope voided the document and war broke out. It was reissued after King John’s death. In other words, it tells us something very English while at the same time something very universal about history. It did not come unasked and it did not come without the threat of violence, rather it came about as the result of an enormous amount of pressure building up on the king of the day.

Thirdly, it does not talk in terms of general legal principles, which again is a very English way of approaching the problem. It deals with specific grievances, to which specific responses are made in the context of the just thing to do. These are then generalised and translated into large-scale universal legal and moral principles.

Fourthly, we should not forget that in clause 20 it reiterates the medieval Christian principle that human needs must be given priority over everything else, which is why it says, for example, that if a man commits an offence, the King should fine him, but not so heavily as to deprive him of his livelihood. A merchant may not be deprived of his merchandise and a villein or a worker may not be deprived of the instruments of his husbandry. His livelihood is his natural right which may never be trampled upon.

The other thing it does very explicitly is in clause 16. It talks about how people who owe money to the Jews should be treated, and goes on to say that non-Jews should be treated in exactly the same way. This establishes an important principle which counters any form of anti-Semitism. At that time, that was an extraordinary contribution, and we should not ignore it and simply talk about democracy.

Finally, it ensures the freedom of the Church. The King assures the barons that not only will the Church be left free to practise its own leadership but that there will be no interference in its elections.

If these are some of the important distinguishing features of this historic document, the question is how to celebrate its 800thanniversary. Why are we celebrating it in the first instance? The reason is twofold. First, it is to reaffirm and deepen our own commitment to the rule of law, which, as we know from the experience of the past forty years, is constantly in danger of being eroded. It is intended to remind us of the great tradition to which we belong and of how we can continue to affirm the heritage that we cherish.

The second objective is to spread awareness of the rule of law in the rest of the world, and, if I may be a little devious, to affirm our soft power. It reminds the world that we have achieved something very significant in our history of which the world should take note. If these are our two objectives—to reaffirm and deepen our own commitment to the rule of law and to affirm the commitment to the rest of the world and in so doing to increase our soft power—the rest of what I am going to say follows.

Take the first objective. How do we deepen and reaffirm our own commitment? Exhibitions are all right. People will come and people will go. We need to catch young people and get them to realise what our history has been about, what the rule of law is about and what constraints it imposes upon executive power. Therefore we should be organising lectures and seminars in schools and in major cities up and down the country, encouraging local events and holding a national essay competition, as has happened in some other countries in relation to other events. Continuing with the point that the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd, made, I favour an annual lecture in Westminster Hall where the two Houses can meet to take stock of where we are in the field of the rule of law. It may not be entirely inappropriate. It will allow the two Houses to meet regularly as well as provide an occasion to take a moral and political audit of where we stand at any given time.

As far as the rest of the world is concerned, I have two suggestions. I hope they are not presumptuous but worth considering. First, the British Council should be asked to take an active role in sponsoring and establishing annual lectures in key countries, designed to explore further the idea of the rule of law. If I may be even more ambitious—I do not think we are that short of money—I should have thought that the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta was an occasion in our history where we might institute a prize comparable to the Nobel Prize, given by the British people through the agency of the British Government, to the person who, during the particular year, has contributed the most to establishing the rule of law. Some such imaginative idea equivalent to the Nobel Prize would be a worthy tribute to this great event.

**Lord Addington (LD):** My Lords, I find myself in a position that reminds me of the first intervention that I think I made in this Parliament. At Question Time, the noble Lord, Lord Hill, was asked about why some historian—I cannot remember which one—was being removed from the national curriculum. I stood up, from a little further back than I am now, and suggested to the noble Lord that we should not worry about the nuances of a particular historian but about the facts, because intellectual fashions change. I compared intellectual fashions to hemlines.

I am probably of an unfashionable hemline and an unfashionable tradition in history, for which the noble Lord, Lord Sewel, of course has to take some responsibility, as he was running the University of Aberdeen when I was there as a student. I come from a school of historians, which I do not think is popular now, which did not regard Magna Carta as being that big a deal. It was something that failed; it was the control of those outside resisting the creation of a modern, centralised state where you control power and did not deal with your overmighty subjects. It was a symbol of King John’s failure, and was then imposed on Henry III, who is nobody’s idea of a romantic hero. He did not assert full control of his kingdom until the age of 29, which is very old by medieval standards, and ended up, in the last part of his career, with the kingdom effectively run by his son, who had to win a battle and a civil war for him after the rebellion of Simon de Montfort. Magna Carta was issued a couple of times during that reign.

Magna Carta is reissued and referred back to every time the overmighty subjects beat up a king. “You have failed, we are going to impose something on you”, they say. When I discovered that I was very unfashionable, in terms of intellectual background, I did a bit of reading. Magna Carta itself refers back to a conveyance of rights from the reign of Henry I. The barons then imposed it on King John, who was known as Softsword—today that would be a sexual reference but then it referred to the fact that he was not very good at fighting, or at least was not perceived to be. The fact that the statues round here, dusty as they may be, are wearing armour and thumbing broadswords conveys quite a lot of what I read about that process. I always felt that a successful baron was like a medieval Hell’s Angels leader, in that he came in and asserted his rights by force, through his skill at arms.

Magna Carta has gone on to be something else and the idea has emerged, whether justifiably or not, that the rule of law comes from it and seems to be embodied in it. If I go past a copy or a facsimile of it here with Americans, they stop and go, “Wow”. I was always much more impressed by the draft Declaration of Rights when we had it on display here, with its crossings-out and ink-stains, which set out the tripartite idea of sovereignty: Lords, Commons and Crown together. It may just be an educational accident, but I am told that I am intellectually cynical. The idea of Parliament did not get going until a fair bit after Magna Carta. It was something that was generally called when the Executive—the English royal family—wanted money out of their subjects, usually to fight a war. That was something different.

Magna Carta may have set up an idea, but a study into the way that an idea grows and captures attention and the way you refer back to a golden age might be a more important thing than its point in history. It might be more important to look at the fact that it can suggest something else to somebody. The events themselves will be argued over, but the fact that you are still arguing over them is probably a greater contribution to an idea than any historical events will be.

I hope that we can reflect that and do not make it out to be some great, almost religious, experience on the part of those imposing it. It was not. It was somebody saying, “We will deal with our problems now”. When they did not get their own way, they called in a French army to get rid of the king. That does not sound like the start of democracy to me.

**Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho (CB):** My Lords, I, too, thank the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd, for proposing this debate. To me, a novice in this House, she is a titan in it and an inspiration. I admit some relief in speaking before the noble Lord, Lord Bourne, who will make his maiden speech, and I wish him well.

I agree that the reach of the Magna Carta has been profound, but I suggest that this is an opportunity to increase it dramatically. The idea came to me during an experience a couple of weeks ago. I take part in the charity Speakers for Schools, set up by the BBC economics editor, Robert Peston. It sends people doing interesting things into schools to encourage the pupils. Speaking in this Chamber is testing; it is matched only by speaking to 200 or 300 15 to 16 year-olds. Two weeks ago, as I said, I spoke at a fabulous school in a very deprived area of Willesden. To break the ice and calm my nerves, I asked the pupils in the room how many had heard of the website that I co-founded, lastminute.com. To my surprise, around 80% of hands shot up. I then asked how many had heard of the House of Lords. Imagine my surprise when only around 5% of hands shot up.

I tell this story not so that noble Lords may congratulate me on my notorious website but, rather, to share a worry. It is a profound problem for us all if people understand the buying of holidays online better than our Parliament. It is not only in the classrooms of Willesden that there is a lack of knowledge. As noble Lords may remember, even our own Prime Minister struggled to answer when the American chat-show host, David Letterman, asked him the contents of the Magna Carta.

I would like to suggest that this anniversary could be a wonderful opportunity to try to engage a new generation with the history and impact of the institutions in our democracy. Next year is the 25th anniversary of the invention of the world wide web by Sir Tim Berners-Lee, another globally important invention from the United Kingdom. I think we should launch a groundbreaking project, led from this House, to create a Magna Carta for the 21st century, and I think we should use the web to do it.

There is a phenomenon on the internet called crowdsourcing, where you ask for ideas, services or even money by getting contributions from a large group of people. Sites such as Kickstarter or Peoplefund.it are increasingly used by companies wanting to test products or by charities needing money for projects. I think that the original Magna Carta is an amazing early example of crowdsourcing. You have only to read part of its history to see how each clause was debated and how much it was tweaked and changed to reflect a variety of interests. Would it not be phenomenal to use the technologies of today to reimagine the document and, in doing so, try to inspire more interest in and understanding of the work of Parliament?

There are already examples of Governments who have attempted to redraw their constitutions using the power of the internet. In 2010, the Finnish Government approved technology behind a new open ministry platform, which acts as a hub for citizens who want new laws voted on in the country’s Parliament. After the financial collapse of 2008, the Icelandic Government used social media to rebuild their constitution and involve all citizens in new policies. As Minister Thorvaldur Gylfason said:“The public sees the constitution come into being before their eyes … This is very different from old times where constitution makers sometimes found it better to find themselves a remote spot out of sight, out of touch".

This, to me, is the crucial point.

We are living in a time when we know people feel disengaged and disinterested in the process of policy-making, yet this work affects everyone. Noble Lords should have seen the amazed looks on the faces of those pupils in Willesden when I explained some of the legislation going through this House.

Let us build on the anniversary of the web in 2014 and create a Magna Carta for now; not a formal constitution but a living, breathing, open document that could be created and live on the web. With the power of networks in this House and the clever engagement of the technology sector, I think we could create a wonderful mechanism to engage more people—and, crucially, more young people—with the extraordinary legacy of the document so famously sealed, finally, in 1215.

**Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth (Con):** My Lords, I am most grateful for the custom of securing the Chamber Doors; it serves to preserve an audience that I might otherwise lose. I have no illusions, at least in my case, that there are hordes of Peers clamouring outside to get in.

When I arrived here just a few short weeks ago, people told me to expect something like school—which I can just about remember—and it is: corridors that all look the same; bells going off, here Division bells but there class bells; the friendly rivalry of the party system, just like the house system at school; and the kindness of the staff and the encouragement of the Whips, like benevolent prefects and teachers. Before I get barred from the restaurants here, let me make haste to say that the institutional analogy breaks down with the catering—the catering here is like Nigella Lawson, Gary Rhodes and Jamie Oliver all rolled into one, at the top of their form.

As I say, everyone here has been most kind. My two sponsors, my noble friend Lord Hunt of Wirral and the noble Lord, Lord Elis-Thomas, have been helpful, thoughtful and supportive. So, too, has my mentor, my noble friend Lady Fookes. I should also mention one other person who has helped me here. When I was a student at Cambridge, my first public speaking meeting was chaired by a certain councillor, Mrs Jean Barker, now my noble friend Lady Trumpington. She presided with great grace, panache and aplomb. I seem to remember, too, that there was quite a lot of drink and eats. If noble Lords blame anyone for my being here, please blame the noble Baroness.

Before arriving here, I had three distinct careers. First, I was a barrister and company secretary of a public company based in London. I helped to market law and accountancy courses, especially in the Far East—in Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong principally, but also in the subcontinent. Secondly, I became professor of law at the Swansea Institute, now Swansea Metropolitan University, and moved to Wales. Thirdly, when I thought my political career was over, having lost a couple of elections for the other place, I became a Member of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999, then Leader of the Conservative Party in the National Assembly and latterly leader of the Opposition in that body. I became convinced that effective devolution was good not only for Wales but for the unity of our United Kingdom.

The Magna Carta of 1215 is the basis of most of our freedoms and a basic statement of the rule of law. I believe that it is rather a significant document. It was described by Lord Denning as, “the greatest constitutional document of all times—the foundation of the freedom of the individual against the arbitrary authority of the state.” Far be it from me to disagree with such a great legal brain.

Its principles have been adopted by the United States and much of the Commonwealth. True, much of it has been superseded and repealed, but it still rightly has immense iconic significance. It is quite right that it should be celebrated. The noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd, is right: we need to do more, and I hope that people are listening to this debate so that we may. We need to have events, cultural and ceremonial, that give renewal to its central messages, and I applaud efforts being made to do just that. The Magna Carta 800th committee and partner organisations such as the excellent British Council, referred to by the noble Lord, Lord Parekh, are doing excellent work; I declare an interest as a member of the advisory council of the British Council in Wales. I trust that there will be a positive response to the noble Baroness’s very passionate and justified appeal.

What lessons are there for us 800 years on? I associate myself with much of what the noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, said—we need to look anew at the issue of having constitutional documents containing our fundamental freedoms. Should our precious freedoms be set out in some constitutional document? I know that this has not been the traditional British approach. Mr Podsnap in Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*was asked in relation to our unwritten constitution how other countries do: “’They do, Sir’, returned Mr Podsnap, gravely shaking his head; ‘they do—I am sorry to be obliged to say—as they do!’”.

A written constitution, even an entrenched one, is admittedly no guarantor of liberty and rights. Some of the worst despotisms in the world have written constitutions. Yet with democratic roots, and with some of the challenges that we now face that are posed to our liberties, this question needs looking at anew.

Interestingly, Magna Carta has separate provisions for Wales and Scotland. It is perhaps a precursor both of the Union and of devolution. In the light of our relatively new devolution arrangements within the United Kingdom, I wonder whether a constitutional document should now set out the legal rights and duties of the United Kingdom, building, I hope, on the work of the Silk commission—I declare an interest here, as a member of that commission—and after the referendum in Scotland.

What is clear is that it is indisputable that liberty’s DNA in these islands can be traced back to Magna Carta, and wherever there is a challenge to liberty: The whisper wakes, the shudder plays,Across the reeds at Runnymede”, as Kipling evocatively said. This anniversary is an important one. We do right to honour it. We must ensure that the event is marked graphically and indelibly, and that it leaves an enduring memory.

**Lord Bew (CB):** My Lords, it is a pleasure to follow the excellent maiden speech of the noble Lord, Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth. If, as he says, he owes something to the inspiration of the noble Baroness, Lady Trumpington, I can assure him that he is not the only person in this House who feels the same way. It was clear that, as a former professor of law, the noble Lord is extremely well equipped to discuss the legacy of Magna Carta. He brings to this House experience of, and a contribution to, the political life of Wales, and also to the charitable sector in Wales, which is enormously valuable. Noble Lords have heard the first of what I hope will be many decisive and helpful interventions from the noble Lord.

I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd, for her Question, and her keen interest in the plans for 2015. I speak as the co-chair of the Speakers’ advisory group for the 2015 anniversaries. I share the post with Peter Luff, MP, from the House of Commons. I pay tribute briefly to Tristram Hunt, MP, who has for the past several months been the Commons co-chair of that committee, but who has recently had to resign because of his promotion to shadow Education Secretary. If, as I very much hope, the celebrations in 2015 turn out to be an event of significance and importance, that will owe something to the work of Tristram Hunt in the past few months.

There are currently seven Peer members and six MP members of this group, and we have additional support from two external members—Canon Jane Hedges from Westminster Abbey and Professor David Carpenter from King’s College London. As part of Parliament Week 2013, on 19 November Professor Carpenter will give a lecture in Portcullis House on “Magna Carta and the emergence of Parliament”, which we hope Members will wish to attend.

The advisory group has been established to act as a consultative body to support and advise the Speakers and officials on matters relating to the anniversary programme, and we are working to develop a set of activities to run throughout 2015. The group assists parliamentary officials in fulfilling ambitions to deliver an accessible, innovative and engaging programme.

The advisory group considers and comments on proposals put forward by officials of both Houses for the anniversary programme, ensures a voice for the Members within the programme, monitors associated risks, and will ultimately participate in the evaluation process. Very importantly, the group advocates for the 2015 programme externally and across both Houses. To that end, I am glad to see here today the noble Lords, Lord Cormack and Lord McNally, whose contribution to the work of our committee has already been outstanding. I am enormously in their debt.

Any critical decisions, in particular those relating to finances, are additionally passed through the usual House committee procedures. Although we have plans for a very full programme for 2015 covering educational, ceremonial and showcase events, much of this work remains in the nascent stages, so it is not yet possible for me to give full details of programme content at this point. However, I am moved to respond to the speech of the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd, and to say that I fully understand the points that she made. We are endeavouring to deliver something that she will recognise as satisfactory. We are focused on that and are determined not to disappoint her, if I may put it like that. I hope that the noble Lord, Lord Sewel, may be able to give some further detail in the concluding remarks of this debate. We very much wish to outline our desire to use these important and historic moments as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to increase public understanding and appreciation of the tradition and evolution of Parliament.

Beyond Magna Carta, the 2015 programme will commemorate the important anniversaries of the de Montfort Parliament, which can be seen as the beginning of a tradition which led to the House of Commons, and we will also have the anniversaries of Agincourt, Waterloo and the death of Churchill. When Churchill succumbed to a stroke in 1965 he interrupted the 750th and 700th anniversary plans for that year with a number of last-minute alterations and cancellations needed. Particularly in this Chamber, where many of Churchill’s most celebrated later speeches were given, it is of tremendous importance that we pay attention to the 50th anniversary of his death. I assure Members that the advisory group is mindful that all these anniversaries are marked appropriately. For instance, we will support the Churchill Alliance with its 2015 plans and are currently exploring the possibility of working with the History of Parliament Trust on an event to commemorate Members who fought at Agincourt.

Furthermore, we have chosen to use the medieval moments as a stepping stone into the whole story of our democratic heritage. The noble Lord, Lord Addington, is quite right. This is a complicated story. We want to use this approach to highlight other significant events that have led to the rights and representation that we enjoy today. We will develop partnerships which enable us to talk to communities across the United Kingdom about their local contributions to our national story, picking up on key moments and events on both a local and national level to tell the wider narrative of democratic evolution.

In the information pack that Members have received there is a very elegant St Albans Magna Carta lecture by Professor Vernon Bogdanor. He makes the point that, for example, in the 17th century the Levellers employed concepts from Magna Carta as a means of putting pressure on the king. That is an example of the appropriation of Magna Carta in the struggle for change in our country. There is of course a vastly important tradition of legal commentary that dates from the 17th century which might be seen as a similar attempt to assert the rule of law against the divine right of kings. The most celebrated example from the 19th century was referred to by Professor Malcolm Chase in a lecture on the Chartists given in the last fortnight in Speaker’s House, at the invitation of the All-Party Group on Archives and History. He pointed to the way in which the Chartists had again appropriated the language of the Magna Carta in a similar way to the Levellers, as part of a particular struggle.

We are trying to develop a partnership with the Riverside Theatre in Newport which I hope will work with us on a project to mark the important contribution of the Chartists. As well as stand-alone events such as this, the programme offers large-scale join-in opportunities for organisations. These will include Parliament Week, which in 2015, after a year of looking back, will take the theme, “What will the next 800 years look like?”, and will have the specific aim of engaging young people in forward thinking about the future of democracy. We envisage that by taking this broader approach we will be better able to deliver a programme which is directly relevant to communities across the whole United Kingdom.

The noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, was quite correct to say that we have a problem. It is not so much that people are fundamentally questioning the institutions of liberal democracy in our society—in some ways the intellectual questioning of the institutions of liberal democracy has never been at a lower level, and was more strongly contested 150 years ago than it is today. However, because of events that we are all familiar with, which have lowered the standing of Members of Parliament in the eyes of the public, we have a problem with the perception of Parliament in broader society.

As an historian I am acutely aware of the power of history to provide lessons for our own time. Our long democratic heritage is something which we should be duly proud of and I believe we can use these anniversaries to raise awareness of the work and institutional value

of both Houses to a range of new audiences. More specifically, many of our proposed activities in 2015 are designed for young people, whether in school, university, or informal settings. It is not a question of telling a naïve story about the growth of our democracy. The noble Lord, Lord Parekh, explained very crisply exactly what the relationship is between Magna Carta and the subsequent evolution of the rule of law and democracy in our country.

We will be trying to adhere to the same degree of crispness, elegance and accuracy in presentation in all that we do. I conclude by saying that it is our hope that we will succeed in 2015 in not disappointing the noble Baroness.

**Lord Cormack (Con):** My Lords, it is very good to be the first on this side of the House to be able to congratulate my noble friend Lord Bourne on an excellent maiden speech. The first maiden speech I had to comment on was that of Mr Dennis Skinner way back in 1970. I said I hoped he would be heard often in the future, I was certainly correct in suggesting he might be, and I hope we will hear more of my noble friend. He was right to make reference to Wales and Scotland. We must not forget that among those to whom Magna Carta is addressed in the preamble is Alan de Galloway, constable of Scotland.

I must declare my interest. Not only am I a member of the committee to which the noble Lord, Lord Bew, referred, but I also have the honour to be the chairman of the History of Parliament Trust and of the Historic Lincoln Trust. In all of those capacities I am seeking to work to ensure that 2015 is a memorable year. We have some marvellous events planned in Lincoln, and I believe that my noble friend—I deliberately call her that—Lady Boothroyd will not be too disappointed by what happens here in Westminster. I agree about the dusting of the statues, I hope something can be done there. The barons and the two bishops who look down on us day by day have not received any housekeeping attention for an extremely long time. As one looks up and thinks of them—the four Williams, the earls of Pembroke, Salisbury, Warren and Arundel, the great barons—one does realise that we owe them a very real debt for what they did to bring the King to account. I do not subscribe to the somewhat jaundiced view of Magna Carta which was advanced in a slightly curmudgeonly way by the noble Lord, Lord Addington. Well, de gustibus non est disputandum.

**Noble Lords:** Oh!

**A noble Lord:** Order!

**Lord Cormack:** Quoting Latin is entirely permissible in this Chamber. What I would like to say to the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd, in particular, is that I have been able to have discussions with the Deans of Lincoln and Salisbury and with the chief executive and chairman of the British Library, the noble Baroness, Lady Blackstone, and I am not unhopeful that the sort of event to which she referred will take place. Obviously further negotiations have to be conducted, but I believe that it would be wholly appropriate to see the four documents here. Whether Westminster Hall would be the right place because of the climatic conditions is a different matter, but it would be good to see them here. Westminster Hall should certainly have great events. In 1965, Her Majesty the Queen came to commemorate the 750th anniversary of Magna Carta and the 700th (sic) anniversary of the de Montfort Parliament. I very much hope that something similar will be able to happen in 2015.

I can also say to noble Lords that I have had some conversations with the Halle Orchestra, and I hope there will be some wonderful performance in Westminster Hall that year.

It wants to be a really resoundingly memorable year in every possible way, and of course it wants to reach out to young people. I hope that we will do symbolic things. On 15 June, the anniversary itself, when we all hope that there will be a great event at Runnymede, it would be appropriate for there to be a public holiday and for Parliament to adjourn, after a brief sitting, to Runnymede and be there with Her Majesty the Queen. That would be entirely right and proper. I hope we might persuade those other countries for which Magna Carta is so important to have a public holiday on that day as well so that we are united in our recognition of the importance of the rule of law.

I would like Westminster Hall to have banners around it with the two ringingly endorsable clauses. Clause 39 reads: “No free man shall be seized or imprisoned, or stripped of his rights or possessions, or outlawed or exiled, or deprived of his standing in any other way, nor will we proceed with force against him, or send others to do so, except by the lawful judgment of his equals or by the law of the land”.

Then there is the much pithier clause 40: “To no one will we sell, to no one deny or delay right or justice”.

It would be good to have that right around Westminster Hall so that young people in particular can recognise the continuity of Magna Carta, and its fundamental importance to our very way of life. I hope that the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd, will feel that those of us who serve on the Committee from the two Houses of Parliament are entirely at one with her in her sentiments of wanting this to be a really memorable year in the history of our Parliament and country. We are certainly determined in Lincoln, where we have one of the four original copies, to make it one of the most memorable years in our history, with exhibitions, a Three Choirs Festival and many other things—all of these, I say to the noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, reaching out particularly to the young. For the youth of the nation are indeed the trustees of our posterity.

**Lord Dykes (LD):** My Lords, it is a great pleasure to follow my former Commons colleague the noble Lord, Lord Cormack. We worked together on a number of schemes, some including human rights, both overseas and in the UK. We, as MPs, came to know of his knowledge of and affection for the history of Parliaments from ancient times and of his experience of reading and writing about those things. We are very grateful. This is an important occasion. I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd; I was impressed that she was well under her time limit in her opening, which was commendable.

I share some of the noble Baroness’s anxieties and concerns about some things. Although they will be immensely important, the World War 1 commemoration period, over several years, will have far more government money attached to it than anything to do with the Magna Carta celebrations. That is a pity. In a historical context, Magna Carta is deeply inspiring.

We are grateful, too, for the excellent maiden speech from the main coalition party Benches of my noble friend Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth. His knowledge of this matter is profound, and I am sure that he will be heavily involved in a number of these activities. I am also grateful for the excellent historical analysis of the noble Lord, Lord Parekh, and my noble friend Lord Addington. They gave the original background to it. We should not get carried away with the starry-eyed Mills and Boon version of Magna Carta which is not really true.

The gradual development over hundreds of years of democracy as we now know it, as well as the importance of the rule of law, was opportunistic, episodic and accidental. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 was one stage in that process, as were the United States’s declaration of independence and constitution. What a pity we did not pay more attention to the French Revolution’s*Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* because we were afraid of it; it is a substantial document but little known in this country because of the intellectual and psychological gap between the political cultures of the continent and ourselves, with our Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-American traditions.

I am also grateful—this is a time for mentioning gratitude, I think—to Sir Robert Worcester, that talented and noble son of Kansas as was, but now an English American, for leading the Magna Carta Trust committee and planning a number of events. I am particularly glad he sent me a helpful briefing memorandum about this debate. It reminded me that, speaking at the UN General Assembly in 1948, as she submitted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Mrs Eleanor Roosevelt argued that,

“we stand today at the threshold of a great event both in the life of the United Nations and in the life of mankind. This declaration may well become the international Magna Carta for all men everywhere”.

That is very telling in the way it rebounded around the world as more and more countries realised the importance of the various texts in the Magna Carta and the subsequent editions of it and what it meant for us.

Hundreds of events have been considered and planned with the hope, according to this memorandum, that in 2015 more than 100 countries will be commemorating the importance of what began on an open plain 800 years earlier to this generation and many generations to come. The danger is that it will not be noticed enough by the media unless there is real force and psychological strength behind that effort. That does need a lot of attention and organisation. It is amazing how quickly time goes when one is coming up to a deadline of that kind.

I note, too, that after the Second World War Germany and Japan were apprised, quite rightly, of the virtues of the Magna Carta, in its modernised form, the text, what it meant and the rule of law. What a model democracy Germany has become after the nightmare it went through with the Third Reich. It is a very impressive achievement, and we are proud to be friends with the great German people.

I believe, too, that even though one of our weaknesses—and it is a controversial point, so I apologise in advance for making it—is in not having a written constitution, there is a feeling of pride in many people that we are unusual and unique in not having one, although all the other Commonwealth countries which came from the Anglo-Saxon tradition directly with independence much earlier than the colonies do have commendable written constitutions. At least, though, we have access to the European treaties, which are an international kind of constitutional backcloth to the rule of law and human rights, and the European Convention on Human Rights. All those things started 800 years ago as gradualistic concepts in a very different context with very few people involved. The barons in those days were very exclusive indeed, unlike the huge, overlarge House of Lords Chamber we have now with far too many barons. Despite that reality all of us would like to be considered to be here validly, both the noble Barons and the noble Baronesses. The more noble Baronesses we have, the better.

There is a lot to be done. I think that if all those threads come together and the Government put a reasonable budget figure on the expenditure as well as other organisations and the private fundraising that will go on, this can be a great occasion for all of us to be proud with lessons for the future and particularly for the younger generation.

**Lord Bilimoria (CB):** My Lords, Sir Bob Worcester, the chairman of the Magna Carta 800th anniversary commemoration committee, in a recent speech, summed it up really well—foundation of human rights, father of all constitutions, basis of our civil liberties, rights of free men and now women and of legal tradition, the bedrock of our systems of democracy. Then he says, “Who are its guardians?” He says it is our system of rule of law, jurisprudence, of justice. I say the guardian of this nation is this wonderful, unelected House, which is the cornerstone of our democracy.

As the first Zoroastrian Parsee to sit in this House, I would like to talk about Cyrus the Great, one of the greatest emperors of the ancient world, best known for two things. The first is the Cyrus cylinder, perhaps the first recognisable modern legal instrument. In the UK we consider the role of the Magna Carta. Without fail when I take people round this House, I show them the facsimile copy in the Contents Lobby. We think it is great: sealed in 1215 on the field of Runnymede; the first bill of rights; power of the barons over the king; the establishment of the House of Lords and the House of Commons; a Parliament free of the direct control of the monarch.

However, the Magna Carta is juvenile compared to Cyrus’s cylinder—a declaration found in the ruins of ancient Babylon that set out the great deeds and genealogy of Emperor Cyrus. Created around 530 BC, the cylinder notes Cyrus’s great humility and tolerance, which formed vital aspects of the tradition of the Zoroastrian faith. This is true because of the role that Cyrus played, not just in the protection but in the active promotion of many religions and faiths that flourished in the Persian empire during his time. It cites his building projects and the territories that he conquered.

Cyrus is well known for his magnanimity. A specific example is the refuge that he gave to the Jews in Egypt. Is that not amazing? Magnanimous—Magna Carta. Neither Cyrus nor the Magi priests in his court who acted as advisers sought to convert the people of the conquered lands to the Zoroastrian faith.

I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd. What a fabulous speech—as always. “A celebration of democracy”, she said. She says that the House of Lords feels left out, and that the Houses of Parliament should be the headquarters of the celebration in the 800th year. All four original copies should be here. Her idea of a joint session of both Houses to celebrate it is fantastic, and it should take place on 15 June 2015.

We know that the British Library holds two copies of the original Magna Carta. I am proud to be an ambassador for the British Library’s Business & IP Centre, and I assure noble Lords that I will do my best to try to persuade it to play a role. The noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, mentioned the Prime Minister stumbling on American TV when he was asked what Magna Carta stood for. He could not say, “the Great Charter”, and he could not remember the date, 15 June 1215. We need everyone, particularly schoolchildren, to know this. The noble Lord, Lord Bourne, in his excellent maiden speech, mentioned the British Council. We have this wonderful institution, of which the noble Baroness, Lady Prashar, is deputy chairman, to spread to word of the Magna Carta in these celebrations around the world through our British Council centres.

The noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, spoke of a Magna Carta for now. Why do not we—the House of Lords—have a competition around the country for schoolchildren to come up with a Magna Carta for today, and then have the debate in the House of Lords that we have every year? It would be wonderful. We do not have a written constitution. In a recent speech, Vernon Bogdanor said that almost every country has a written constitution, but our constitution has evolved, adapted and developed. It has been spontaneous. We do not want a written constitution; it would not be right for the structure that exists now. But what a wonderful idea to have a competition for a Magna Carta for today.

I am so thrilled to hear the noble Lord, Lord Bew, give his assurance to the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd, that she, and we, will not be disappointed. That is very reassuring. I ask the noble Lord, Lord Sewel, to reaffirm this reassurance. There is no question that the Magna Carta celebrations should be held in the magna-Parliament—this Parliament here in Westminster.

**Baroness Prashar (CB):** My Lords, as Baroness Prashar of Runnymede, I am most grateful to the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd, for initiating this debate with such enthusiasm and passion, and I agree with all that she said. As we know, Magna Carta has played a critical role in developing our form of democratic government, subject to the rule of law. It is important because of the influence it has had, not only in this country but around the globe, and particularly in the Commonwealth, in establishing the constitutional principles governing any society committed to the rule of law, which as we know is fundamental to any democracy.

It was also influential when the European Convention on Human Rights was drawn up. Its significance was captured by in a lecture in Australia in 2003 by the noble and learned Lord, Lord Irvine—I had the pleasure of hearing it in person—who said: “In many respects Magna Carta has transcended the distinction between law and politics and its legacy represents a joint commitment by Monarchs, Parliamentarians and the Courts, to the rule of law”.

However, despite the importance of Magna Carta worldwide, it has never had the recognition that it deserves in this country. The monument in Runnymede, to which I always take my visitors, has no information available on the significance of Magna Carta. This illustrates to me the complacency we have about our freedoms. The 800th anniversary is an opportunity to rectify the situation and reaffirm our commitment to the rule of law. It is a golden opportunity to develop activities which will help revitalise and reaffirm the fundamental principles of Magna Carta.

I read with interest the briefing provided by the House of Lords Library and the description of parliamentary plans for the celebrations. I am pleased that the aim of the programme will be to promote wider public engagement with Parliament and create partnerships with external bodies. I think that is very important. I was also pleased to see that Parliament will produce educational materials and will support Magna Carta-related education projects to be delivered by the British Council. I declare that I am a deputy chair of the British Council. I congratulate the noble Lord, Lord Bourne, on his maiden speech and assure the noble Lord, Lord Parekh, that work is in hand by the British Council not only to work on educational materials but to rekindle the spirit of Magna Carta internationally.

It is important that emphasis is placed on education and engagement of the wider public, particularly the young. It is also important that these activities raise awareness, highlight the universal relevance of the Magna Carta in today’s world and make it a living, breathing document. In his St Albans lecture in August, which was referred to by the noble Lord, Lord Bew, Professor Vernon Bogdanor said: “The era of … representative democracy, as it has been understood for much of the 20th century, is now coming to an end”.

I agree, so what we need now are initiatives which encourage participation in order to harness civic spirit in our communities and young people. We need to emphasise the importance of the rule of law as a basis of a viable democracy. I emphasise that this anniversary provides that opportunity.

I will draw attention to an exemplary initiative in Egham, a town very near to Runnymede, where Magna Carta was sealed. This initiative, “Magna Carta in Egham”, is led by Egham Museum and I am associated with it. The impetus for this project sprang from concern that the planned celebrations would be a passing spectacle which would leave local residents passive bystanders without any involvement or lasting legacy. To ensure that this does not happen, volunteers—I emphasise that they are volunteers—from Egham Museum are working to produce online resources to support debates and are organising a series of Magna Carta constitutional conventions, bringing students from across the UK to Runnymede to debate and draft a modern-day charter. They are also planning an exhibition at Egham Museum with satellite displays at various locations around the area. A lot more activities will also take place using new media. I was delighted to hear what the noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, said in that regard. Perhaps we need to collaborate to ensure that we can harness what is happening.

The important thing is that the focus is on local engagement and participation. It is these types of activities which need support and outreach from this House and Parliament. While symbolic events and celebrations are extremely important, this Parliament needs to reach out. I therefore urge this House to work in partnership with such imaginative and community-based projects and use the occasion of Magna Carta’s anniversary to encourage participation, help unleash local civic spirit, and make the best use of new technology to ensure that that happens. We are not a closed House; we must link up with what happens locally.

**Lord Stevenson of Balmacara (Lab):** My Lords, I join all noble Lords in thanking the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd, for providing the opportunity for today’s excellent debate, which has been most interesting and to the high standard usually found in this House. I thank all speakers for their contribution. In particular, I praise the maiden speech of the noble Lord, Lord Bourne, which was excellent and of very high quality. There have been three maiden speeches today, of rising quality, which has set the bar very high for those who have to follow. I noted, as other noble Lords will have done, his early bid to be appointed to the Refreshment Committee. This raises the stakes a bit for those who are yet to come. These days, if you want to put in a bid for where you want to be in a few years, you have to do it in your maiden speech—that sounds a bit daft.

The noble Lord and other speakers mentioned a theme which came out of these discussions—whether or not we should have a written constitution. We do, of course, have a written constitution. The problem is that it is dispersed into so many different documents. What we are really talking about is codifying our existing constitutional documents into a single place. That would have been a fantastic solution to the question of how to celebrate Magna Carta in 2015. It may take us until 2115 but we should not give up the aim to do it. The noble Lord is correct, and I absolutely agree with him on that point.

I also thank the Library for its very high-quality briefing which brought us right into the debate. It was interesting to read Magna Carta again. It is difficult to know what it is these days, because it is hard to imagine what it would have been like when it first

came out. It came across to me, in a curious way, as a bit like a manifesto—that is the nearest analogy I can think of. When you became sovereign you had to engage with those you ruled in order to gain their acceptance of your ability to rule, a bit like a modern-day manifesto.

Other noble Lords have spoken very well about what it means to have a Magna Carta. I endorse a lot of what has been said: it is a fantastic document. It is also very modern. It is fascinating to read in one of its chapters about what to do with payday lenders. The FCA should take note: this has been around for a long time and I am not quite sure why it has taken so long. The sections relating to the City rail against those who might lobby unfairly for advantage: those who are discussing the lobbying Bill might reread that section too.

We have a number of proposals to come from the noble Lord who will respond to this debate and I do not want to delay the House unduly before that. However, I want to run over a couple of things that struck me during the debate. The noble Baronesses, Lady Prashar and Lady Lane-Fox, were right to pick up on the need to engage with the younger generation in a modern way. This has to be done through social media; there is no point in trying to look at old ways of doing this. We have to get real, get into social media and involve them. I hope that that will be picked up and taken forward.

The noble Lords, Lord Cormack and Lord Bew, were a bit unkind to us in raising our anticipation of what is to come. I hope they will be satisfied with what they hear. I like the idea of decamping to Runnymede but, as the noble Baroness, Lady Prashar, said, we would need to do something about the accommodation or there will be an awful lot of tents required.

The noble Lord, Lord Bew, reminded us that there are other anniversaries: we must also think about them and find a place for them to be recorded. If we do that then, going back to one of the themes of Magna Carta, which is its UKness, we might also have space for the Declaration of Arbroath which, in Scottish terms, is as important as Magna Carta.

We started with the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd, and her immensely interesting proposal of bringing together all the Magna Cartas in Westminster Hall and using that as an opportunity for a debate of both Houses of Parliament. That is a terrific idea which would certainly help convince the Prime Minister of what Magna Carta and its translation mean, which must be good. For me, and others of my generation, it would answer the essential question we remember from “Hancock’s Half Hour”: “Magna Carta … did she die in vain?”

**The Chairman of Committees (Lord Sewel):** The answer, my Lords, is blowing in the wind. I start, as you would expect, by thanking the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd, for giving us the opportunity to discuss this important issue. She started us off in the expected way: a strong, rumbustious speech which laid down a very clear challenge. I will try to answer at least part of that challenge.

This is the type of debate that your Lordships’ House does very well. It does it very well because it is trying to capture the importance of a particular historical event, to place it, and make an assessment of its contribution to the development of our political system over a number of centuries. Importantly, it does this in a way that illuminates and reinforces the values that underpin our current parliamentary liberal democracy. That is the whole basis for why we should celebrate Magna Carta. It did not deliver democracy by any means, but it was the start of a process that developed concepts that, in time, became absolutely essential in underpinning the nature of liberal parliamentary democracy.

Although 2015 may still seem a long way away, it is important that we make plans. I will say later that there are disadvantages and advantages in having this debate at this stage, which were alluded to by the noble Lord, Lord Bew. We want to involve Members in the planning process, and a number of Members made contributions this evening that clearly deserve to be taken further, and I encourage the officials of the House to have contact with them about the extent to which their suggestions can be taken up and further developed.

The Magna Carta is undoubtedly one of the most important documents in the development of—I use the words carefully—our largely unwritten constitution. There is a historic and political science debate to be had about that, but we are not having it now. Although Magna Carta was forced upon King John as the result of a political crisis and drawn together in haste, it was underpinned by key principles that have shaped our legal and constitutional system. In particular—these have been alluded to and explained throughout the debate—are the principles that the Executive in particular must be subject to the rule of law and that there must be no taxation without consent. There were the beginnings of the key concept of holding the Executive to account. All these principles, as I say, were developed further and underpinned parliamentary democracy. As many Members of your Lordships’ House pointed out, Magna Carta has also played a significant role in the development of constitutions in many other countries around the world. The statues of the Magna Carta Barons, who keep an eye on us here in the Chamber, reflect the connections between Parliament and Magna Carta, and it is absolutely right that we, as this House—I repeat, this House—should celebrate its anniversary.

In the time I have left, I would like to set out some of the plans that both Houses have started to make. First, those plans need to be considered in the wider context of other anniversaries that the House will be marking in 2015. Secondly, it might be helpful for me to say a little more about how our plans fit in with other events being planned nationally. There has been reference to the other anniversaries that will be celebrated in 2015, because it will be a momentous year for Parliament for many reasons. Obviously, some lesser minds will no doubt be focused on the outcome of the general election in that year but there will be a number of special events happening during the year that look back at the important anniversaries that we are here to celebrate.

This debate has already drawn attention to the fact that in 2015 we will mark 800 years since the sealing of Magna Carta. In addition, 2015 will also be 750 years since the de Montfort Parliament. Together, these two anniversaries can be seen as marking the beginning of a process towards our parliamentary democracy, and the de Montfort Parliament in particular has a unique resonance for us because it met in Westminster Hall. The year 2015 will also mark 600 years since the battle of Agincourt and the creation of the office of the Serjeant at Arms, 200 years since the battle of Waterloo and, as has been mentioned, 50 years since the death of Sir Winston Churchill. Parliament will therefore have a lot to celebrate and commemorate in 2015, and officials and Members—I repeat, and Members—have already begun to develop some ideas for possible ways in which this House, along with the House of Commons, may be able to mark these occasions..

In order to help guide this work, the Speakers of both Houses have appointed a number of Members to sit on a speakers’ advisory group for the 2015 anniversaries.

I particularly welcome and thank the noble Lord, Lord Bew, as one of the co-chairs of that group. I understand that the group, as we heard this evening, is already bringing forward suggestions on how these events could be celebrated.

As a general outline for the year of 2015, there will be three phases of activity for Parliament. From January to March, celebrations will focus on the De Montfort Parliament. From June to September, celebrations will surround the Magna Carta. In November, Parliament will host its annual Parliament Week, which promotes all aspects of parliamentary work. There will also be a year-long “Journey to Democracy” narrative, which will enable a broader programme covering the De Montfort Parliament and Magna Carta’s medieval origins and the development of other concepts and rights, and leading all the way to the 20th century and the Human Rights Act. It will be a continuing narrative of a continuing tradition.

There is a problem about the timing of a debate, and I will absolutely honest about this, because 2015 is still quite far away; we are still in the early stages, so there is still a lot to be agreed. That is almost inevitable. The disadvantage of holding the debate today is that I am not in a position to confirm details of the programme in any specific way. However, the advantage is that it is still early enough for suggestions to be taken into account and for proposals to be considered further. Knowing the particular parliamentary skills of the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd, I think she recognised the opportunity and chose this time for the debate. I am happy to respond to that.

I have a number of examples of how we will operate with partners from Surrey County Council and Runnymede, and how we will run a whole series of activities throughout schools in the whole United Kingdom to concentrate on engagement and make the connection between what we do now in the day-to-day life of politics and the enduring values that underpin that activity.

We are, of course, working with the British Library; we have our own parliamentary archives at work; the National Archives and the City of London will be involved and we will have a series of lectures setting it in an historic context, but in a contemporary context as well. In particular, we will go into schools.

I was particularly taken by the contribution made by the noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, on how we have to use every means available to us to engage, especially with younger members of society. Many of us, I am afraid, still have not made that step towards engagement with a digital and more technological age. I would very much hope that she will allow us to tap her expertise in that area.

Let me return to the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd. I thank her not only for her speech, but for bringing forward this issue, particularly because she is a former Speaker of the House of Commons. That lends a particular authority to what she has said. I accept the force of her argument to have a single great parliamentary occasion that, if possible, brings together what are technically the engrossments—the surviving copies of Magna Carta—and thus in a sense bring them home to Parliament. That would provide an opportunity to demonstrate their centrality to the development of our political culture. I cannot give her an assurance that that will happen; I can only give an assurance that it will be fully and properly considered. I mean that as strongly as I can convey to the noble Baroness.

Several references were made to the statues in this Chamber. Every time that happened, the noble Lord, Lord McNally, gave me a quick dig in the ribs. If you look around, you can see the dust on the statues. We have looked at this and it would be a tragedy if, perhaps not in the immediate future but in the medium term, something was not done to improve the statues.

The problem is that when the present Parliament building was built, the Victorians were still sending young boys up chimneys to sweep them, and I suspect that they had the same sort of solution in mind when they put the statues so high up. Since then, of course, we have had health and safety and God knows what else. However, the opportunity to do that will arise in a few years’ time when we come to look at the whole building and consider the possibility of renewal and restoration. We will have a chance to do the work in a fully comprehensive way.

Perhaps I may make a few comments about what has been said by individual speakers. I thought that the noble Lord, Lord Brooke of Sutton Mandeville, made an interesting observation about producing a board game. I am always keen to increase the revenue of the House, so it is something that we might wish to look at. The noble Lord, Lord Parekh, gave us an absolutely outstanding and correct theoretical analysis by placing Magna Carta in its wider perspective. The question that has been reflected by many noble Lords, including the noble Lord, Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth, in his excellent maiden speech, is “Why celebrate Magna Carta?”. The vital point to make is the linking of Magna Carta with our enduring liberties. The noble Lord, Lord Addington, blamed me for his lack of historical appreciation and then went on to make a very good critical argument. I am therefore quite happy that in some way I may have been responsible for that.

I have tried to deal with the points that were made in the debate without, I am afraid, dealing with every single contribution. I had 12 minutes in which to speak and I have already overrun by two minutes so I cannot deal with Cyrus the Great, and for that, I apologise.