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Parliamentary Libraries Celebrate the 800th Anniversary of the Magna Carta

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Abstract:

The Magna Carta of 1215 stands at the heart of English and American law. This paper reviews the plans of the UK Parliamentary libraries and the UK Library of Congress to celebrate the historic 800th anniversary of this document in 2015. It illustrates how the Magna Carta anniversary will help both countries tell their stories of rights and representation through the centuries up to and including their relevance to democracy today.

Neither we nor our bailiffs shall take other men's timber for castles or other work of ours, without the agreement of the owner.

Magna Carta, Clause 31¹

¹ 1215: The Year of Magna Carta, by Danny Danziger & John Gillingham, 2003, p. 115

A King hoping to avert civil war approved Magna Carta in a field in the countryside of Runnymede, England on June 15, 1215. Since that time it has become one of the most celebrated documents in history. While King John conceded to the demands of his barons and affixed his seal to Magna Carta, less than three months later the Pope voided the document and war broke out. In spite of its initial failure, Magna Carta was reissued several times after the death of King John and has become a cornerstone of the rule of law worldwide.

This great charter of rights and liberties stands at the historic heart of English and American Law. It is one of the earliest statements of limited government and a point of departure for centuries of thought on individual rights. This paper describes how parliamentary libraries in the UK and USA, will celebrate this historic anniversary.

UK: House of Commons and House of Lords

The year 2015 provides a special opportunity for our parliamentary public engagement strategy. As well as the Magna Carta 800th anniversary the year is also the 750th anniversary of the De Montfort Parliament of 1265 which created new and recognizably modern conceptions of parliament and democracy. Several other anniversaries are also relevant.

Parliament Week – an idea to promote public engagement

In 2011 the UK Parliament held its first “Parliament Week” which was designed to focus attention and activity around a particular theme and proved popular with people across the country, many partner organisations and Members of both Houses. Following the success of 2011 further annual Parliament Weeks are planned and 2015 provides a strong opportunity to build on this idea. Rather than limiting activity to a particular week the intention is to turn it into a year-long programme with a number of key events throughout the year.

The objective will be to support and further the public engagement aims of the House of Commons and House of Lords. The intention will be to involve Members and staff of both Houses and to tie events into the work and business of parliament making links to significant moments in our history.

A core principle will be to work with partners, using connections built up through previous Parliament Week events. The Magna Carta 800th Committee will enable us to link closely with a wide range of Magna Carta anniversary activities in the UK and around the world.

As part of this we will work closely with the British Library supporting their Magna Carta programme which includes:

- A major exhibition in the Paccar gallery in the spring/summer period covering the June anniversary date. This will include substantial interactive elements alongside the more traditional exhibits and incorporate a range of loans of manuscript and printed documentary material and prints and artefacts
- A comprehensive set of online resources relating to Magna Carta
- A programme of public lectures, debates and events

A journey to rights and representation

The focus of Parliament's programme will be on events in parliamentary history that are staging posts along the way towards rights and representation and have drawn strength from the Magna Carta. Planning is at an early stage but the libraries of both Houses and the Parliamentary Archives have already identified the following as leading candidates for inclusion:

- 1215: Magna Carta: a charter of liberties
- 1265: de Montfort Parliament: representatives discuss national issues
- 1300: Articles on the Charters enforcing the charters and restraining the royal prerogative
- 1339: Taxation requires parliamentary consent
- 16th century: Magna Carta as basic unalterable law enshrining liberty
- 1628: the Petition of Right
- 1679: Habeas Corpus Amendment Act
- 1688-89: the Glorious Revolution and 1689 Bill of Rights
- 1765: Stamp Act and American independence
- 1832: Great Reform Act
- 1838: emergence of Chartism
- 1856: Statute Laws Revision Act
- 20th century: universal suffrage
- 1958: Life Peerages Act
- 1988: Human Rights Act
- 2015: Parliament today

Our own archives collections will play a major role featuring original Acts of Parliament.

The concept of a journey will also be captured by giving the programme local themes. The success of our Connecting with Communities project which built partnerships with many organizations across the UK and an increasing emphasis across Parliament in regional working outside Westminster provides excellent opportunities to maximize the reach and impact of what we do.

USA: Library of Congress

Beginning November, 2014, the Library of Congress will host one of the four original 1215 exemplifications of Magna Carta. Its visit marks the Library of Congress's celebration of the 800th anniversary of the signing of the document: *Magna Carta: Muse and Mentor*.

The exhibition will present precious medieval manuscripts, printed books, pamphlets and other priceless documents from the collections of the Library of Congress that tell the story of the heritage of the Magna Carta. It will trace the path of Magna Carta's influence from King John and the Barons at Runnymede Meadow in 1215 through the rise of English political liberty and the American founding to current events in the unfolding story of the rule of law throughout the world.

Lincoln Magna Carta

At the center of the exhibition will be the Lincoln Cathedral copy of the Magna Carta. The Lincoln Cathedral Magna Carta is one of four existing exemplifications of Magna Carta dating from 1215. The Lincoln Magna Carta along with the other three 1215 copies were given Memory of the World Status by UNESCO for their singular world historical significance. Its name derives from the document's regular custodian, Lincoln Cathedral in Lincoln, England. Magna Carta will be on loan to the Library of Congress from Lincoln Cathedral for the opening month of the exhibition giving American audiences a first-hand look at one of the lasting treasures of human history.

The November opening date of the exhibition was chosen to correspond with the seventy-fifth anniversary of the first time the Lincoln Cathedral Magna Carta visited the Library of Congress. On November 28, 1939, Magna Carta was placed on temporary deposit at the Library of Congress in order to protect it from damage that might come to it as a result of the war. The British Ambassador to the United States, Philip Henry Kerr, the 11th Marquess of Lothian, Lord Lothian, accompanied Magna Carta to the Library and in an official ceremony handed the document over to Librarian of Congress, Archibald MacLeish.

This seventy-fifth anniversary was chosen to celebrate the United States' role in preserving the heritage of Magna Carta throughout the ages, both in the literal sense of ensuring the survival of our most treasured artifacts and in the broader sense of embodying its spirit in our laws and institutions.

Symposium

In an effort to contribute to that heritage, the Library of Congress will host a symposium in association with the exhibition. The Library will invite recognized scholars from a variety of disciplines including law, history and political science to present original research on Magna Carta and its influence in the legal and political history of the nations it has touched. The symposium will also examine the potential influence of the Magna Carta in the 21st century.

Audience

While the Library is committed to advancing scholarship, the exhibition itself will be written and curated in order to both inform the specialist and the general public. It will be accompanied by a virtual exhibition on the Library of Congress's website along with educational materials based on the exhibition for teachers to use in civics instruction for students in grades K-12.

The Library of Congress looks forward to taking a leading role in the American commemoration of the 800th anniversary of the signing of Magna Carta in 2015. The Library's exhibit is an integral part of the world-wide observations of the 1215 signing of Magna Carta. Queen Elizabeth II is patron of the Magna Carta Trust's 800th anniversary celebrations, and the

Library of Congress is working closely with the Trust. Celebratory events surrounding the 2015 anniversary are already in progress and widely publicized in the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth countries.

We hope to honor the legacy of Magna Carta by sharing the richness of Magna Carta related materials that the Library of Congress has preserved in its collections.

Educational Outreach Initiatives

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Library of Congress will develop a series of special programs including lectures, gallery talks, teacher institutes and educational materials, docent-led tours of the exhibit, and more.

- **Gallery Talks**
Curator-led special tours and other focused public talks will be presented within the exhibition. Gallery Talks are free and open to the public.
- **Special Tours**
Group and individual tours of *Magna Carta: Muse and Mentor* will include school groups, student groups, youth organizations, adult organizations, and more.
- **Teacher Institutes**
Teacher Institutes give educators from around the country the opportunity to discover, learn, and develop teaching strategies using the world-renowned collections and exhibitions at the Library of Congress. These institutes will provide educators with an opportunity to engage in discovery learning and to develop strategies to teach about civic education and the basis for American law using the Library's collections, related Library exhibitions, and the Library's online programs. Teacher institutes take place at the Library.
- **Online Outreach**
Magna Carta: Muse and Mentor will be made available as an online exhibition that will follow the themes of the onsite exhibition. Library of Congress online exhibitions are viewed by hundreds of millions of people worldwide, averaging three million

viewers each month. The exhibition will take its permanent place among the many acclaimed exhibits on the Library of Congress website, www.loc.gov/exhibits.

- **Exhibition Publications**

In addition to the *Magna Carta: Muse and Mentor* publication, an illustrated brochure will be available as a free handout in the exhibit. Drawing on the exhibition's central themes, this handout will summarize the content of the exhibition and the original materials presented in it.